

## The Critics: Theatre

# Beautiful bonds of a disabled life hit home

**KILL ME NOW**  
**THE PARK THEATRE**

★★★★☆

After a 17-year hiatus, Greg Wise makes a welcome return to the stage in Canadian Brad Fraser's delicately pitched disability play, *Kill Me Now*.

The play opens on a scene that conveys the tragic, beautiful bond between Jake [Wise] and his severely disabled, adolescent son Joey [Oliver Gomm]: Jake is giving Joey a bath and Joey has an erection. Jake gently makes light of it. Throughout, Fraser repeatedly gives his characters well observed comic lines to show that the dynamic between a disabled person and their carer renders neither party a saint and requires constant attention. When Jake also develops a disabling physical condition, help comes in the unlikely guise of Joey's best friend – mentally disabled, womanizing Rowdy [Jack McMullen]. Aided by regular visits from Jake's spiky sister, Twyla [Charlotte Harwood], this unlikely modern family tries to make the best of it.

Generously billed as a romantic comedy, the density of the multiple, harrowing scenes feels, at times, a tad indulgent.



■ Greg Wise and Oliver Gomm in *Kill Me Now*. Picture: Alex Brenner

Director Braham Murray never nails down the exact social milieu but this is a canny move. Rather, the text gives us clues: Jack was a waiter before he became a published author, he uses the excuse of weekly hockey games to cover up his trysts with married Robyn [Anna Wilson-Jones], Twyla works in a dead-end computer job, and everyone knocks back plenty of whisky to cope. But the set is minimal and these echoes of bleak Raymond Carver America

only pepper the play, so the story's universality is driven home.

The acting is excellent: Wise and Gomm are superb physical performers; Harwood is vulnerable and febrile, bristling with anger and hurt pride. While Rowdy's character is not credible, McMullen's energy and charisma make for welcome relief and Wilson-Jones' tender performance brings a heartfelt dignity to these broken lives.

Caroline David

# Innovative drama is both heroic and tragic

**LOVE SONG OF THE ELECTRIC BEAR**  
**HOPE THEATRE**

★★★★☆

Snoo Wilson was among an innovative group of writers who set up Portable Theatre in the 1970s to present socially and politically provocative drama, with minimal scenery and effects. Few these days have heard of them, but they started a movement that now inspires contemporary cutting-edge theatre.

There was a danger that this play, never before performed in Europe, might seem dated or pretentious to a modern audience, but not at all.

From the moment this energetic and talented young cast turn themselves into a bicycle and the characters riding it, we are on a roller-coaster of inventive merriment. This is ensemble performance at its best. Diane Beck, Laura Harding, William Hartley and Chris Levers play an extraordinary number of roles with conviction, wit and very little confusion. Their dependency on costumes, props, and scenery is minimal: they construct and dismantle what they need as they go along.

They support Ian Hallard as Alan Turing and Bryan Pilkington



■ Ian Hallard and Bryan Pilkington. Picture: Scott Rylander

as Porgy the bear. The former portrays, with near-perfect timing and immense sympathy and understanding, the complex personality of the man who helped defeat the Nazis in World War II, while retaining the writer's cartoon-like presentation of a story which, in spite of the light-hearted spirit of writing and

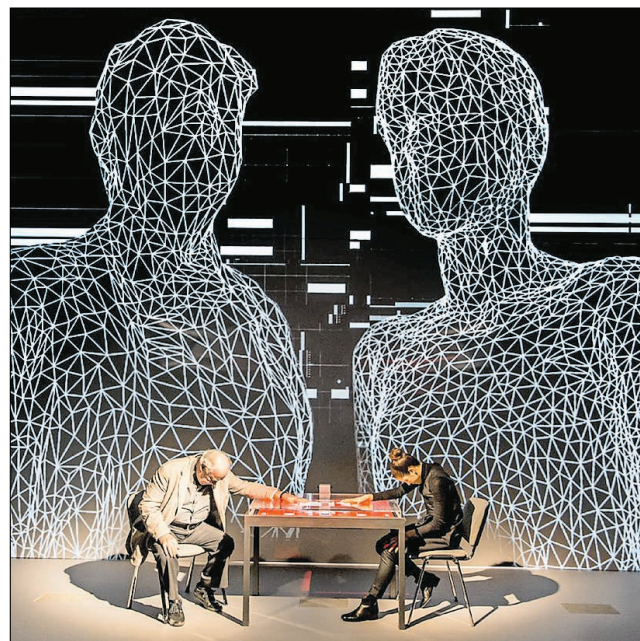
acting, is heroic and tragic.

As for that giant teddy-bear – well, the first appearance of this pantomime creature is a shock. But Porgy is far from being an amusing gimmick. He is pivotal, a Greek chorus, commenting on the action and giving advice and support, while also feeding important information and moving the plot along when required. The task is gargantuan and Pilkington accomplishes it where a lesser actor might have tipped into farce, or, worse, tedium.

Paul Freeman (sound) and Tom Kitney (lighting) provide an interesting background using contemporary technology to create the 1940s context without being patronising, combining clunky sound effects and classical music to indicate the universality of the themes as well as the jokey presentation. This production is perfectly adapted to the intimate space at The Hope, a new venue presenting quality work. Unsubsidized, yet the tickets, unlike in so many larger, smarter performance areas, are affordable. Good luck to them! The play deserves a wider audience – which perhaps it will find.

■ Until 21st March.

Jill Truman



# Topical fable shines light on darkest corners of life online

**THE NETHER**  
**DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE**

★★★★☆

From Twitter abuse to games and websites indulging our darkest desires, the virtual world is constantly challenging traditional morality and legality. American playwright Jennifer Haley goes a step further in her gripping 2012 dystopian vision of a "real" world overtaken by a sophisticated, immersive internet: *The Nether*. This all-consuming realm even has its own law enforcement. Detective Morris (Amanda Hale) is determined to find and destroy the server powering *The Hideaway*, an eerie evocation of *Victoriana* where users' avatars can seduce and murder children. Creator Sims (Stanley Townsend) argues it's a safe space for "sick" people to live out fantasies without harming others. Morris believes it legitimises and enables violent paedophilia.

To what extent can you police virtual behaviour, or the imagination? This taut 75-minute Royal Court transfer teems with ethical quandaries and startling twists, as Morris's Orwellian investigation relentlessly unmasks users. Yet it's difficult

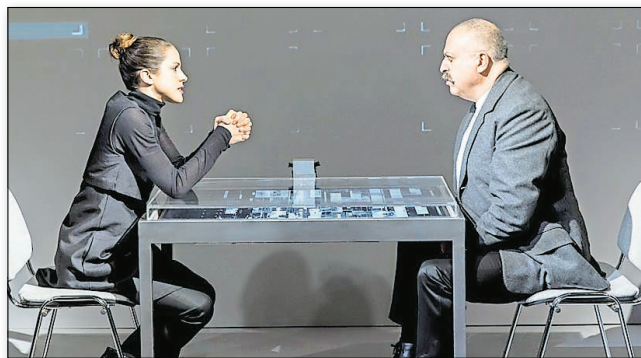
to argue for the separation of private role-play and real-life consequence. In this near-future, the physical world is barren, *The Nether* an increasingly sensuous paradise, leading some users to "cross over" permanently.

Dramatising online activity can be deathly, but Jeremy Herrin's sure *Headlong* production boasts a dazzling Es Devlin set, with Luke Halls' twitching surveillance projections and 3D modelling bleeding into the florid hues of the hyper-real *Hideaway*. Precocious Iris (Isabella Pappas) offers charming, calculated innocence, enough to make undercover agent Woodnut (Ivanhoe Jeremiah) forget himself – or, horrifyingly, find himself.

Though Haley gives weight to all viewpoints, with imposing Townsend and David Calder's addicted punter demonstrating the seductive power of this apparent liberation, she saddles high-strung Morris with daddy issues, making her counterargument unnecessarily schematic. Still, this searingly topical fable plunges you into the depths, from which there is no easy escape.

■ Until April 25.

Marianka Swain



■ Morris (Amanda Hale) and Sims (Stanley Townsend) in *The Nether* at the Duke of York's Theatre. Picture: Johan Persson