

Dark, savage, with a touch of Basil Fawlty

Greg Hicks tells **Alex Bellotti** about his "poisonous" new role as an egomaniacal tabloid newspaper editor who dresses up as Julius Caesar at the weekend

As a seasoned member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Greg Hicks has played Julius Caesar before, but he never imagined returning to him quite like this. In his latest play, *Clarion*, at the Arcola, the actor plays an egomaniacal newspaper editor, Morris Honeyspoon, who – in the clearest sign of madness – spends his weekends dressed as the tyrannical Roman leader.

Written by ex-Evening Standard and Daily Express journalist Mark Jagasia and directed by artistic director Mehmet Ergen, *Clarion* tells the blistering, darkly comic story of Britain's worst newspaper, *The Daily Clarion*. With politics dividing the country more than ever, the paper's worst crimes are under threat of exposure. Desperately searching for the traitorous leak, Honeyspoon and washed-up foreign correspondent Verity Stokes (Clare Higgins) mastermind a murderous day of reckoning.

"It's provocative and it's going to be very interesting how audiences take it," says Hicks, "because whilst it's savagely

funny, it cuts quite to the bone about the way we are, the way the country is and the way the world of the press is.

"I'm sure it'll wrongfoot people actually, which is great. It could make people review their position; it's the same conundrum as people listening to Nigel Farage and, in spite of their best judgement, kind of nodding in agreement to some of the things he says."

While still "tussling with what sort of a beast" the play is, Hicks is enjoying playing Honeyspoon, a man whose extreme views carry more weight because of the power he holds over his readership.

The 61-year-old name checks Nigel Farage, Enoch Powell and Oswald Moseley as real life figures he's been drawing inspiration from for the role, and adds that his challenge is to give him "savagely humanity with a touch of Basil Fawlty".

Considering the success last year of another satirical newspaper play, *Great Britain*, why does he think press corruption continues to capture the public's imagination four years after the phone hacking

scandal broke?

"I think people are desperate to know what's real because everything is so manufacturable. Either on your computer or your phone, people want to know what is the real issue, what is the real truth? It's very difficult to find – in fact we had a discussion in the rehearsal room the other day saying if you wanted to find out in the media what is really going on, which paper would you buy? It was actually a very long conversation leading to the rather depressing conclusion of not many of them."

Hicks admits he doesn't often work with new writing – especially with a debut playwright such as Jagasia – but he considers the Arcola one of London's greatest off-West End theatres and had been "tapping on Mehmet's door for the last four or five years" following their last collaboration in 2008's *An Enemy Of The People*.

Contrasting with his past performances as *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, he is looking forward to people seeing another side of him when he spouts the "poisonous" vocabulary of Honeyspoon and says that a play's ability to cause



■ Greg Hicks and Clare Higgins in *Clarion*

controversy is a powerful tool.

"It's vital. I don't mean courting controversy just for the sake of it, which can be a very empty gesture. We've all seen that a million times; it's the dramatic equivalent of Miley Cyrus – let's see what else I can do on a rapid shock level. *Clarion* doesn't do that, it's far better researched and felt and composed than that.

He continues: "A good play

is like a great building. It's got tremendous scaffolding and everything hangs together in the right room, with the right lighting and the right dimensions. You do read a lot of plays that aren't hung together very well – this is not one of them."

■ *Clarion* runs at the Arcola until May 16. Visit arcolatheatre.com

Staunton's coming up roses again

GYPSY SAVOY THEATRE
★★★★☆

Everything's coming up roses for Imelda Staunton with triumphant West End performances in Sweeney Todd, then Hampstead transfer *Good People*, and now a barnstorming take on pushy showbiz matriarch *Mamma Rose*.

Based on the memoir of burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee it recounts the itinerant childhood of plain, bookish Louise and her prettier tap-dancing sister 'baby June' on the depression-era Vaudeville circuit.

Rose is prepared to lie, steal and starve herself for her dream of June's stardom, until a crucial audition forces the girls to question whether she's really 'doing it for you baby'.

When June jumps ship, the abusive momma's laser sights fall upon neglected Louise – even if it means her stripping.

Some of the best musicals are about showbusiness itself, and director Jonathan Kent savours the seedier aspects of life on the road; the cheap hotels and cheap food, the children's cheesy act featuring pantomime cows and Uncle Sam, and a memorable trio of ageing dead-eyed bump 'n' grind burlesque dancers who urge Louise to 'get a gimmick'.

He gets around the uncomfortable notion that Louise is empowered by stripping, suggesting how she's damaged and isolated by the dysfunctional matriarchal bond.

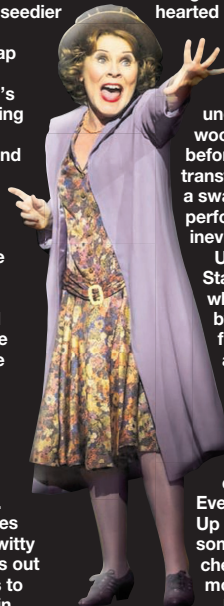
Staunton relishes Arthur Laurents' witty book, angrily bites out Sondheim's lyrics to *Some People*, or in

Wherever We Go suggests the warmer woman she might have been had life been less harsh and disappointing.

Pretty downbeat for a Broadway show, it could use a romance beyond Rose's faltering one with kind-hearted agent Herbie.

(Peter Davison) And Laura Pulver spends so long as the under-confident, wooden Louise before her 11th hour transformation into a swan, that her performance feels inevitably muted.

Ultimately it's Staunton's show, when, abandoned by Louise, she fights back a panic attack to reassert her indomitable spirit in Jules Styne's ironic anthem of the American dream, *Everything's Coming Up Roses*, she'll somehow have you cheering for this monstrous momma. Bridget Galton



Clichéd take on closeted star misfires

THE GLASS PROTÉGÉ
PARK THEATRE
★★★★☆

Backstage dramas are nothing new, nor are ironic commentary on glamorous Hollywood's sleazy reality. LGBT advocate Dylan Costello's minor amendment to this well-worn formula focuses on Golden Age Tinseltown's double standards, specifically its manufacture and control of stars' private lives.

It's 1949, and the victims of manipulation are closeted British ingénue Patrick Glass (David R. Butler); co-star and secret lover Jackson Harper (Alexander Hulme), purveyor of wildly overblown Southern charm; and Marilyn-esque pill-popper Candice (Emily Loomes), straitjacketed by her dumb blonde persona. Completing a clichéd set are a chain-smoking manager and

nefarious gossip columnist – both antagonists too lazily caricatured to trouble with.

If we were not already assured, through signposted plotting and heavy-handed portentous statements, that the central romance was doomed, we're given a dispiriting vision of the future: in 1989, Patrick (Paul Lavers) is a curmudgeonly recluse, his sole companion an unloved, eccentric son (Stephen Connery Brown). Sheena May's resourceful East German escapee Ava, mail order bride-turned-assistant, is the evening's bright spot, but frequently squandered as Patrick's cod psychologist.

The dual time

periods prove cumbersome, robbing one another of dramatic momentum and ensuring only surface-level characterisation. There's also a missed opportunity to compare historical hypocrisies with contemporary pressures – how might that studio control and erosion of privacy translate to the age of social media and 24-hour news? Costello's trip down memory lane has neither fresh insight nor the kind of layered wit found in the *Donmar's City of Angels* – the only hope is to win our emotional investment.

Butler and Hulme produce some nice moments in the love story, but Matthew Gould's stilted production struggles to enliven the mannered dialogue. A well-intentioned misfire.

Marianka Swain

