

The Critics: **Theatre**

Modern day Carmen is ripe with ambition



■ Viktoria Vizin, John Light and Noma Dumezweni in *Carmen Disruption*. Picture: Marc Brenner

CARMEN DISRUPTION THE ALMEIDA

★★★★☆

A huge animatronic bull lies wheezing, almost imperceptibly, centre stage in Simon Stephens' freewheeling play inspired by Bizet's opera.

The audience enters past a mocked up dressing room into a part-reconfigured Almeida auditorium, set up with red velvet seats and a chandelier. Two cellists play Bizet's score. But for anyone hoping to orientate themselves through their knowledge of the plot – forget it. *Carmen Disruption* is an ambitious blend of impressionistic monologues, expressionist movement and opera with only a sliver of a storyline

running through it.

The Singer [Sharon Small] travels to endless cities, staying in identikit hotels, always singing the role of Carmen. Her life of artifice and repetition is becoming too much: she's losing her memory. Incarnations of modern-day types from the opera circle her world: a rent-boy as Carmen [Jack Farthing], Don Jose the soldier as a female cab driver [Noma Dumezweni], Escamillo the bull fighter as a strung-out banker [John Light], and village girl Micaela as a suicidal student [Katie West]. All characters are equally disconnected, enslaved by their dependence on cell phones and social media. The passionate spirit of Carmen [Viktoria Vizin] haunts them. Projections of their dialogue appear as email messages, texts,

tweets on a scrolling dot-matrix display screen. They rush past each other, avoiding collision – just. This bleak night of the souls culminates in a motorbike crash.

There is some wonderful movement direction by Imogen Knight to convey their repetitive neuroses and the cast is exceptional in Michael Longhurst's carefully staged production. Farthing is mesmerizing as the heartless, egoist boy-Carmen. While Stephens' script is ripe with mordant witticisms, the play's concept dominates any drama and the novelty of all this experimentation wears thin after a while. It's the extracts from the opera, so beautifully sung by Vizin, which make a lasting impression.

Caroline David



■ Greg Hicks in *Clarion*. Picture: Simon Annand

Skewering of tabloid excess packs an urgent topicality

CLARION ARCOLA THEATRE

★★★★☆

Morris Honeyspoon is a monster. In editorial conference, he halts objections with a blast of his air horn, and when a puppyish staffer challenges his blanket anti-immigration policy, Roman helmet-clutching Morris takes sadistic pleasure in ritually humiliating him.

It's not the first depiction of a megalomaniac newspaper editor; but former hack Mark Jagasia brings impressive insider detail to his debut. The *Daily Clarion*, a (semi) fictional 125-year-old tabloid rag featuring scaremongering headlines like "Fury Over Sharia Law For Toddlers!" is bucking the print journalism trend by upping sales, but at what cost?

Foreign correspondent-turned-soused opinion columnist Verity is reluctantly complicit until faced with the consequences of such tactics. Jagasia makes the crucial point that laughable extremist arguments cease to be humorous if they become genuinely influential. It's a disquieting thought in the run-up to an election defined by fringe parties and increasingly

divisive media coverage.

Jagasia laments the decline of traditional Fleet Street, suffering its worst cuts "since Sweeney Todd", but acknowledges the abuses that thrived in the good old days. It lends *Clarion* greater dramatic weight than cartoonish Great Britain, though the apocalyptic second half suffers from overbearing pathetic fallacy and a soapy twist.

The skewering of tabloid excesses gifts Greg Hicks a juicy role, cursing like Malcolm Tucker as he dismisses nuanced debate ("Ambiguity's for c**nts"). Hypocritically, he peddles British family values, though the paper's Cypriot proprietor runs a chain of topless burger bars. Which is worse: Morris genuinely believing his rhetoric, or cynically manipulating the public?

Clare Higgins' world-weary, complex Verity is a compelling emotional centre, and there's good support from Laura Smithers' entitled intern, Peter Bourke's pious enforcer, Jim Bywater's dim news editor and John Atterbury's Cassandra astrologer. Mehmet Ergen's production balances humour with urgent topicality.

Marianka Swain



■ Shock Treatment, King's Head. Picture: Peter Langdown

Dr Frank N. Furter's return is anything but a horror show

SHOCK TREATMENT KING'S HEAD

★★★★☆

It's been 42 years since Brad and Janet Majors first joined Dr. Frank N. Furter for a night of wild shenanigans in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s premiere at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. With brilliant lyrics by *The Rocky Horror*'s writer Richard O'Brien and adapted from Jim Sharman's book by Tom Crowley, this sequel sees the Majors catapulted into the moral vacuum of present-day

reality TV.

Wholesome Janet and Brad turn up at a TV studio to take part in a live therapy show about couples in failing relationships: Brad [Ben Kerr] is unemployed while Janet [Julie Atherton] believes her career as a Senior Research Assistant is soaring.

The couple's erstwhile best friends, Ralph [Mateo Oxley] and Betty Hapschatt [Rosanna Hyland], host the show. Like the Majors, all is not well in the Hapschatt's marriage. Janet becomes the poster girl for media mogul Farley

Flavours [Mark Little] while Brad is given electric shock treatment to 'cure' his depression. Soon, Janet strips off her A-line skirt to reveal a skimpy black dress, Ralph lustily pursues silver fox Mr Flavours and two bogus doctors attempt to crank up the pressure dial on the shock treatment machine. Betty denounces Flavours' machinations but will Janet come back down to earth?

While the *Rocky Horror*'s storyline was equally absurd, the premise was clearer and stronger. Here the invented TV studio

set-up tells us nothing we don't already know about contemporary narcissism. Nor is *Shock Treatment* as sexually transgressive and the anarchy is more farcical than political.

But it's wonderfully entertaining. Benji Sperring's gloriously camp satire is razor sharp: Atherton sizzles in the smoking 'Looking for Fame,' Oxley snarls his way through the defiant 'Breaking Out' and the ensemble's encore of 'Little Black Dress' marks an intoxicating start to the King's Head spring season.

Caroline David