

Savile's on stage, but is it too soon?

Playwright Jonathan Maitland tells Alex Bellotti why some questions remain about the decade's most horrific scandal

As soon as his latest play was announced, Jonathan Maitland began to feel the backlash. "He might get attacked," said one commenter online, while another labelled it "an absolute dog of an idea" in a statement typical of many.

Dramatising the biggest scandal of the decade was always going to be divisive, but as its creator explains, there are "compelling reasons" for staging Park Theatre's new show, *An Audience With Jimmy Savile*.

Starring actor and impressionist Alistair McGowan as Jimmy Savile, the play examines why the television personality was allowed to abuse dozens of children and young people throughout the '70s and '80s.

A similarly pertinent question though is if this just comes too soon.

"It's very difficult to know when too soon becomes the right time," says Maitland, whose previous show at the Park Theatre, *Dead Sheep*, examined the ousting of Margaret Thatcher.

"I think you have to be guided by the people who were affected most and the people I've spoken to who were affected most don't think it's too

soon at all. Their issue with timing is that it should have been a lot sooner actually; it should have been done 30 or 40 years ago."

Set in 1991, the play shows two sides to Savile's story. One strand depicts celebrities paying homage to him on a *This Is Your Lifestyle* television show about the recently knighted 'Most Trusted Man In Britain'; the other tells the darker journey of a victim he abused trying to convince people of her story.

As part of his research, Maitland met with and talked to several of those abused by Savile. During the first interview he conducted, he was struck by the victim's "mixture of strength and damage".

"As somebody else who was a Savile victim, who's now a psychotherapist, told me, people who are abused can 'present' very well. That means to make you think

they're really together.

"I think what was interesting about the first lady I met was that she was incredibly together, but then something she was saying made me realise she was putting on a very good show for me, but there'd been some very dark moments on the other side."

As a good friend of Maitland's, Alistair McGowan agreed to look at the script and was impressed enough to offer to read for it shortly after. "The inconvenient truth is that Savile was, I'm afraid, entertaining and charismatic and obviously Alistair can do that bit, but he can also do the horrible dark, wizened psychopath side of him as well and that's very important for any portrayal," Maitland adds.

So why a play? The writer points out that most shows tend to operate at a loss, and to further disprove any suggestions of exploiting tragedy for commercial gain, the team has pledged to donate a "substantial proportion" of any profits to the National Association for People Abused in Childhood. "The key reason for doing it is that you make people understand something that they wouldn't understand nearly as much if they saw a TV programme about it. I'll give you an example: there was an



■ Alistair McGowan prepares for *An Audience With Jimmy Savile*. Pic: Helen Maybanks

interview the police did with Jimmy Savile in 2009.

"You read the transcripts and it's unbelievable the way he manipulated and intimidated the police – by the end of it they were saying, 'Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir.'"

"I saw a TV documentary recently and they had a close up of the transcript and said this just wasn't a very good interview. The audience

would think, 'Well why wasn't it?' There was just no sense of what that interview contained.

"When we recreated that interview at the read through of the play you could hear jaws hitting the floor and people came up to us afterwards saying, 'That was unbelievable, was that true?' I said, 'Yes it's virtually verbatim' and they replied 'My god, that's really

interesting. So that's how he got away with it.

"That's precisely what theatre can give you, a reconstruction and answering the most important public service question, which is 'how did he get away with it?'"

■ *An Audience With Jimmy Savile* runs at Park Theatre from June 10 until July 11. Visit parktheatre.co.uk



Restoration revival packs modern punch

THE BEAUX' STRATAGEM

National Theatre

★★★★☆

Farquhar the feminist – who knew? Simon Godwin's nimble revival reclaims this 1707 Restoration comedy romp as a bold treatise on love, marriage and gender inequality. Patrick Marber's judicious tweaking pairs its surprisingly pertinent discourse with equally contemporary humour – a key contribution to a production of peerless timing.

Scheming dandies Aimwell (Samuel Barnett) and Archer (Geoffrey Streatfeild) are hunting for an eligible heiress to solve their financial woes. Arriving in rural Lichfield disguised as master and servant, they set their sights on

Dorinda (Pippa Bennett-Warner), but Aimwell's growing affection threatens their plot, while Archer is drawn to her unhappily married sister-in-law (Susannah Fielding).

Godwin plays up Farquhar's post-modern approach, honouring genre conventions while knowingly subverting them. Audience asides are coolly ironic and song breaks signposted by accomplished folk musicians claiming the stage – the pre-emptive arrival of an accordionist is the evening's finest comic moment. The only dud is an act-closing monologue leaden with rhyming couplets.

Lizzie Clachan's multi-level set shifts seamlessly between lowly tavern and great house, while the highborn hustlers are paralleled by the innkeeper's thieving gang. But the biggest scam of all is marriage, suggests Farquhar, who borrows

from Milton's radical tracts arguing for divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. The deathly combination of Richard Henders' Sullen, welded to a tankard, and his wife, "cheated into slavery", makes divorce as attractive a prospect as the inevitable climactic wedding.

Fielding's Mrs Sullen is more spirited than bitter, bottled energy desperate for release, well matched by animated Bennett-Warner. Swashbuckling Barnett and Streatfeild transition superbly from cads to heroes, and there's great support from Chook Sibtain's imposing highwayman, Jamie Beamish's accent-juggling priest, Amy Morgan's shrewd wench, Jane Booker's dotty healer, and scene-stealer Pearce Quigley's lugubrious servant. Warm, witty and unexpectedly wise.

Marianka Swain



■ *The Beaux' Stratagem*. Picture: Manuel Harlan