

# Love tale has astronomical ambition

This multi-stranded study of relationships is imperfect, but should be lauded for its scope, says **Marianka Swain**

CONSTELLATIONS  
TRAFALGAR STUDIOS

★★★★☆

Ever wonder what might have happened if you'd made a different decision? Nick Payne's ingenious 70-minute play, which has been on tour and to Broadway since its 2012 Royal Court premiere, uses theoretical physics to explore our fascination with the road not taken.

Or rather the road is taken, but it's one of millions. The basis for *Constellations* is the quantum multiverse theory, which suggests the different outcomes of every event and decision exist somewhere in a parallel universe.

Payne fractures the romcom, providing multiple variations on each familiar relationship landmark. In one

version, cosmologist Marianne (Sherlock's Louise Brealey) is immediately rebuffed by beekeeper Roland (Joe Armstrong); in another, they engage in hilariously gawky flirtation.

Their first date is stiff and self-conscious, sweetly solemn, or – aided by alcohol – frank, funny and erotically charged. A break-up is final, or a mere obstacle, and in a sudden shift into darker territory, they might not actually have control over when the end comes. Predestination defeats free will.

The latter development may frustrate, as it undercuts the consequences of individual choices, and Payne's non-linear storytelling also makes it tricky to track those consequences. Unlike *Sliding Doors*, with its comparatively straightforward forking, there are countless possibilities, which doesn't

necessarily reward investment in a particular argument or reunion.

But jittery Brealey and amiable Armstrong do sterling work to ground this dazzling intellectual exercise. Their courtship is engagingly authentic, full of awkward but well-meaning miscommunications and missed connections. When love does blossom, it feels as miraculous as any great scientific discovery, and its loss just as monumental.

Michael Longhurst's snappy production benefits from Tom Scutt's simple yet striking set: bare platform, acting as blank slate, and suspended balloons evoking stars, atoms, brain matter or emotions. Imperfect, but astronomical ambition.

Joe Armstrong and Louise Brealey in *Constellations*.  
Picture: Helen Maybanks



## Music reigns over clarity in riotous Green Day musical

AMERICAN IDIOT  
ARTS THEATRE

★★★★☆

There's a raw, anarchic energy to this jukebox musical based on the eponymous Grammy-grabbing album by American punk-pop band Green Day.

But if it doesn't always overcome its narrative deficiencies or the limitations of its constrictive staging, it's a grungily raucous night out that fully showcases Billie Joe Armstrong's infectious melodies and caustically angry lyrics.

From the moment clips of George Bush and the twin towers appear on a TV monitor, we're thrust into the title track's post-9/11 identity crisis and gripe about a 'nation controlled by the media'.

Following the attack, we meet three disaffected slacker friends eager to escape suburbia. Tunny joins the army and gets messed up in Iraq, Gerard is forced to stay with his pregnant girlfriend, and Johnny goes to the big city and gets graphically messed up on drugs.

Racky Plews – whose parents John and Katie run Upstairs at the Gatehouse – choreographs and directs with pep and invention if not always with slick precision.

There's a well-executed army recruitment video, a hospital scene where Tunny hallucinates on morphine, and elsewhere cheerleaders dance with bombs, girls pee on pregnancy sticks, and zombie rockers dance with creepy masks.

A virtually sung-through 90-odd minutes demands clarity,



Amelia Lily and Aaron Sidwell.  
Picture: Darren Bell

but I was hazy about the role of Johnny's friend St Jimmy and the story stutters to an overlong close. While X Factor finalist Amelia Lily was in fine voice as Johnny's love interest, her physical awkwardness made it hard to invest in the relationship. Tightly packed in with Sara Perk's chunky multi-level set, it would have benefitted from breathing space and a gig atmosphere by seeing the band. But Aaron Sidwell – channelling Renton from *Trainspotting* and Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* – makes Johnny's quieter moments with just an acoustic guitar resonate, and Alexis Gerred is powerful as the angst-ridden injured Tunny.

Bridget Galton

## Nomads connect movingly with audience

THE LYRICAL NOMADS  
ST PANCRAS OLD CHURCH

The Lyrical Nomads – a band of travelling minstrels comprising singer-songwriters Sam Garrett, Nate Maingard, Ny Oh, Roaman and songwriter/guitarist/producer Tom Smith – played a three-part set in the intimate setting of St Pancras Old Church on Monday.

The evening ran troubadour-style, with band members performing their own pieces solo or accompanied. Ny Oh gave a thrilling rendition of *Dreamcatcher*, a haunting song from her eponymous EP; its

catchy melody performed in an almost tearful voice, with accompaniment from a whirling dervish with lights on strings.

Tom Smith's virtuoso but sympathetic lead acoustic guitar made a perfect counterpoint to Maingard and Oh's vocals on *Always Wandering*, a simple but compelling song about the search for identity in a confusing world. Sam Garrett followed with *Namaste*, a rousing reggae-style paen to spiritualism and unity.

Unafraid of recognising the darker side of human experience, the Lyrical Nomads bring a rarely heard gravity to joyous lyrical musical expression.

In the tradition of troubadours and poets like Leonard Cohen, the collective contrasts upbeat songs with tales of heartbreak, fear and bewilderment about the modern world, and a profound connectivity with its audience's lives and experiences. As Maingard said: "We are celebrating our connection with the audience, not the separation between the two, as with some bigger bands."

The evening ended with an 'om' or 'aum' – a Buddhist-type hummed mantra that had the whole audience united in reflection.

Simon Duval Smith



Lyrical Nomads. From left: Ny Oh, Tom Smith, Nate Maingard, Sam Garrett and Roaman