

## Theatre: Reviews

# Love and physics in a parallel universe

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 breakup is final, or a mere obstacle,



■ Joe Armstrong and Louise Brealey picture: Helen Maybanks

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.

Marianka Swain

## Wide-eyed kids will love trickster mouse

THE GRUFFALO  
LYRIC THEATRE  
★★★★☆

Julia Donaldson's modern fairytale owes much to the European folklore of the enchanted forest, a place of monsters and magic where nothing is quite as it seems.

The Gruffalo's "deep, dark wood" is home to not only dangerous predators like Fox, Owl and Snake, but also the eponymous beast himself, a fearful creature whose reputation is as terrifying as the reality.

On the hunt for nuts, our hero the Mouse ventures deep into the forest, placing himself at increasingly greater risk, and finds himself having to construct ever more outlandish lies to escape becoming a meal for his hungry adversaries.

The Mouse himself has roots in the trickster mythology which gave birth to characters like Brer Rabbit and the Native American Coyote, outwitting his opponents, here



■ Owen Guerin and Ellie Bell

persuading the Fox, Owl and Snake that he is friends with a terrifying monster known as the Gruffalo.

But as is often the case with these tales, the old adage of "be careful what you wish for" holds true, for the creature he crafted from his imagination turns out to be very real, and also keen on enjoying Mouse as a tasty snack...

Drawing on Donaldson and Scheffler's story, but expanding

it with further background details and original songs, the live version might require a certain suspension of disbelief to see its human cast as the creatures of the book, but it doesn't take long to achieve this goal.

My three-year-old daughter soon accepted that the characters on stage were the same as those she had encountered on the printed page, and sat enchanted as the familiar events unfolded before her eyes.

She wasn't convinced about joining in the songs or interacting with the actors, but preferred to sit wide-eyed, taking it all in and enjoying the experience, with the occasional refuge in a cuddle when things got a little bit scary.

The hour-long duration was just long enough to hold her attention, and she came out of the theatre chatting away about what she had seen – proof the performance made a positive and lasting impression.

Matt Adams

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