

The Critics: Theatre

Family affair feels oddly conventional

THE GATHERED LEAVES
PARK THEATRE

★★★★☆

It's a family affair, with real-life mother and daughter Jane Asher and Katie Scarfe joining Alexander Hanson and son Tom in Andrew Keatley's – appropriately enough – family-centric saga.

Three generations of Penningtons have gathered for paterfamilias William's 75th birthday, including estranged daughter Alice, who had an illegitimate, mixed-race child 17 years ago. Her return, combined with William's vascular dementia diagnosis, leads to the spilling of secrets and gradual healing of rifts.

Keatley has crafted a defiantly old-fashioned piece: Edwardian drawing room play meets Radio 4 soap. There's no experimental opacity or poetry, rather a steady stream of helpfully explained revelations. It's like sitting in on an Ambridge therapy session.

The stuttering structure frustrates, particularly in Antony Eden's stolid staging: some scenes are jarringly brief, others meander into repetition. Excising unnecessary previewing and reviewing of events would shorten the running time considerably, or provide room for surplus characters to develop stronger purpose.



■ Amber James and Georgina Beedle in *The Gathered Leaves*.
Picture: Mark Douet

There are also threads left dangling, like a half-formed link between the family's middle-class hypocrisy and 'Tory sleaze' – the play is, nominally, set in 1997.

Where Keatley succeeds is in his evocation of domesticity, unpacking the complications of rituals like games and the giving of gifts. Here, the potency of blood bonds is both empowering and stymying.

Nick Sampson provides a beautifully humane performance as autistic Samuel, and Alexander Hanson is touching as his

put-upon, protective brother. Hanson Jr impresses as obnoxious Simon, Amber James is a buoyant presence and Clive Francis deftly locates autocratic William's vulnerabilities, while Asher cracks the façade of his poised wife.

There's compassion aplenty, with an emphasis on valuing individuals rather than being in thrall to tradition and dynastic legacy, but this is still an oddly conventional choice for an otherwise adventurous studio venue.

Marianka Swain

Religious satire hits mark in double header

BUD/NOBODY IN THEIR RIGHT MIND

PENTAMETERS

★★★★☆

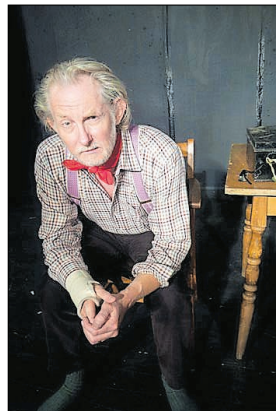
Craig Crosbie returns to the Pentameters with two widely differing monologues.

Bud is by Nick Darke and it was inspired by the author's sight of a four legged chicken. These creatures are hormone induced to produce more eggs – and presumably more drumsticks! However the sight of them set the author pondering about the various aspects of farming and out of these two themes came the character of Bud.

Bud married his wife Myrna for love even though she was ten years older than him, and everybody thought he had married her for her 'Collateral' – her farm. Nevertheless they lived together for two decades despite the ridicule fired at them. It was mostly Sadie,

Myrna's sister, who tried to destroy their friendship, hoping that she would inherit the farm when Myrna died – or alternatively marry the widower. Nick Darke makes Myrna and Sadie real living characters even though we never see them. All the characters are accurately painted with very few words and perfectly delivered by the actor, although maybe the Cornish accent is a little difficult to follow.

But it is the second play that triumphs over the evening. Here Crosbie really comes into his own with his brilliant portrayal of the drunken Vicar Pickering giving a sermon. He quotes grisly lines of religious atrocities from a huge pile of religious books – Christian, Muslim and Jewish – all protesting that there is a kind and loving God. It is a remarkably naughty and cynical piece by Andrew Neil who also directs both plays. This one



was especially written for this production and bound to be a huge success – as a classic standard monologue for solo actors.

It is a quite exceptional piece of inebriate philosophy and very funny.

Until August 9

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