

Theatre: The critics

# Take a dive into Helen's wild world

Infectious laughs for the young at heart are at the core of this innovative solo show, which sees writer and performer Helen Foster traverse the sea bed from Land's End to New York

THE DIVER

THE RAG FACTORY, E1

★★★★☆

A wide-eyed, beguiling theatrical magic takes centre stage with infectious regale in Craft Theatre's *The Diver*; a bold, family-friendly production that unashamedly strips bare the frilly dressings and, consequently, the common trappings of large budgets and stage trickery in the search for the purest of thrills.

Written and performed by Helen Foster alone, she plays Kate Plank, a woman seeking to traverse the sea bed from Land's End to New York. It may sound like a giddily surreal premise (it is), but it wears its zaniness with utmost pride, in a play aimed at the young of age and the young of heart.

Alternating between audience participation and onstage frolics, Foster commands and demands with parity. In the process, a high-wire balance is deftly tackled and a tacit trade-off is exchanged between performer and audience, as *The Diver* sets out a clear instruction for the imagination to be loosened up and the participation to be willing. After an initial reticence, most will find the latter forthcoming with greater and greater enthusiasm as the play proceeds.

While incorporating simple



■ Helen Foster in *The Diver*

puppetry and intermittent soundscapes of narration, the ingenuity from the sparseness of tools is impressive. Helen Foster's exuberance too is infectious. That is not to say that this is an out-and-out success. There

are occasions where the jokes feel as though they have been leaped from the book of comedy clichés, failing to elicit much more than an internal groan. And yet, by virtue of having a high joke frequency running

throughout, the cumulative stream of good-natured larks win the audience over. This is a feel-good production that fulfils its objective and then some.

Faintly farcical, deliriously unhinged and packed with

humour, this amiable work, replete with a free-flowing arc, engages and disarms in a seesaw fashion that somehow keeps it all together.

Until 2nd August.

Greg Wetherall

## Compassionate but too 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



■ Picture: Mark Douet

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. 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

## Slapstick wrestling lifts religious fable

NOONDAY DEMONS  
KING'S HEAD THEATRE

★★★★☆

This two-handed satire of Christian religious fanaticism showcases the ridiculousness of religious zeal.

The play was written by Peter Barnes – the playwright behind *The Ruling Class*, which recently completed a run in the West End – and this is its first major revival since its premiere in 1969.

St Eusebius, played by Jordan Mallory-Skinner, is living as a hermit in the Egyptian desert, having abandoned a life of luxury with the aim of achieving true sanctity. We meet him as he has apparently triumphed over the devil and his temptations, alone in a cave with just maggots living in his festering flesh for company and a tower of his own simmering excrement as a backdrop. With nothing to do but self-flagellate, he is quite content surviving on a diet of black olives,



■ Picture: Andreas Grieger

water and a whole lot of self-righteousness. He pontificates on temptations, whether these be money, women or power, smug in the knowledge that he has rescinded them all.

One day a mysterious second hermit (Jake Curran) appears, with an order from God to evict Eusebius from the desert. He reveals that God has sent him to make the cave his own everlasting retreat. Could this unwelcome visitor be the catalyst that provides St Eusebius' greatest threat to his

sanctity? And is there any real difference between the two self-professed men of god? A contest – staged as a bizarre wrestling-match – as to who is holier than whom, begins, with the prize the rights to the cave. It's slapstick at its best and it's indicative of the narcissism in religious zealots and the futility of religious war. But will Eusebius learn his lesson?

Fantastic performances from both actors, this very physical play is well worth a look.

Emily Govan