

The Critics: Theatre

An explosive, scarring look at motherhood

MEDEA
ALMEIDA THEATRE
★★★★☆

With piercing black eyes and cheekbones that could have been chiselled from Grecian marble, Kate Fleetwood looks every inch the perfect classical Medea. Yet in the last show of the Almeida's Greek season, her starring role in Euripides's infamous tragedy is given a contemporary sting by divisive feminist writer Rachel Cusk. And it is every bit as biting, bilious and painfully astute as her reputation suggests.

The bare narrative needs little introduction. Medea is the grief-stricken wife who, when deserted by her husband for another woman, exacts revenge by murdering their two children. In Rupert Goold's production, an Islington-style townhouse is the furnace in which Cusk – famed

for her books, *A Life's Work* and *Aftermath*, on motherhood and marriage respectively – stokes the fiery fallout between down-on-her-luck writer Medea and her prospering actor husband, Jason.

From the off, Fleetwood looks ghoulish in her torment – introduced to the audience in a zombie-like trance while her mother (Amanda Boxer) amusingly piles layers of outdated wifely advice upon her. Once Medea's voice sounds, however, it is rarely silenced, and the most uncomfortable aspect of her agony is in the lack of empathy she receives across the board; from the chorus of cliquy yummy-mummies to her weaselling husband (played with measured conceit by Justin Salinger), her refusal to suffer in silence is seen not just as undignified, but as the cause for what has befallen her.



■ Kate Fleetwood and Justin Salinger in *Medea* at Almeida Theatre. Picture: Marc Brenner

As the mood darkens, and Adam Cork's orchestral noir score builds with cinematic intensity, Fleetwood ascends to career-peaking depths of grief and terrifying power. The children (maturely played tonight by Lukas Rolfe and Sam Smith) are caught up in her tornado – both admonishing and sharing her grief – but when the climax reaches its peak, the pace

changes.

In a nod to the play's classical heritage, Charlotte Randler appears as the messenger, but while she verbosely delivers a neat twist on the conclusion, it is partially lost in a rapidly-explained chain of superfluous events.

By the time the dust settles, the audience is faced with the question: is modern parenthood

really a meeting of two halves, or are mothers still bound to their children – both biologically and culturally – in a way that fathers are not? Conclusions will no doubt vary, but this production is filled with shards of inescapable, rarely-heard truths about motherhood and marriage. And many of them will settle beneath the skin.

Alex Bellotti

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Touching tale reflects on changing times

EVENTIDE
ARCOLA THEATRE
★★★★☆

A tip of the cap, a nod of recognition and plenty of hearty humour inhabits an affectionate requiem to a disintegrating, vanishing universe in Barney Norris's latest work, *Eventide*.

Set in the back garden of a country pub, genial pub landlord John (James Doherty) regales young local lad Mark (Hasan Dixon) with a controversial blue joke. It prompts a rare smile from Mark, who is facing his darkest day attending the funeral of his childhood sweetheart, who has tragically died as the result of a car

accident. Bursting in on these see-sawing emotions is scatty but well-meaning church organist, Liz (Ellie Piercy).

Liz is also soon subjected to John's risqué gag, but she ends up trumping it with an unintended brace of inappropriateness as a consequence of her runaway, nervous tongue to stranger Mark. The two are quick to bond. With cards kept under wraps initially, it becomes apparent that Liz too is harbouring a pain of her own.

Jovial John represents the old fashioned landlord. The one who knew all his punters by name, drank too much of his own sauce – after all, it's 'at cost' – and frolicked with abandon in and amongst an

inebriated coterie. But last orders are on the horizon, as he faces the financial screws of a divorce. He is packing up and 'moving on'.

With complementary naturalistic and charismatic performances, *Eventide* is a look at endings: time passing, love lost and won, and even the changing of the guard, as the spit and sawdust public houses of old give way to the blandly efficient, impersonal and identikit venue du jour. It may not break new ground, but it is an effortlessly funny and touching drama, and one that treads that fine balance between convivial bonhomie and crushing sadness with notable aplomb.

Greg Wetherall

Unfunny Brand satire finds nothing new

DARK TOURISM
PARK THEATRE
★☆☆☆☆

Back in 2008, Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross pranked-called Andrews Sachs, claiming Brand had slept with his granddaughter. Daniel Dingsdale's debut opens with a similar incident: two radio shock jocks, one a pale imitation of Brand, and a joke about anal sex with a wholesome children's TV presenter. Unfortunately, this play says nothing that hasn't

already been articulated in the intervening period.

Dingsdale's targets are broad and obvious. The cynical celebrity culture, fuelled by publicists, tabloids, and fame-hungry, talentless wannabes. The erosion of privacy and dishonesty of social media.

Loaded issues like date rape, revenge porn, slut shaming and violence against women are chucked in with cavalier tone deafness, while a criticism of glossy mags that demonstrate self-inflicted female objectification needs

further development.

Laddish radio has some topicality with the XFM revival, but Dingsdale's painfully unfunny duo rehash hoary arguments: they're equal opportunity offenders, free speech protectors, and their PC-gone-mad opponents must learn to take a joke.

Adam Lenson's production is unevenly paced, lively moments giving way to stilted lapses. At its worst, it is as mean-spirited and vacuous as the culture it's satirising.

Marianka Swain