

"This wouldn't have happened in Hampstead"

Phil Davies tells **Bridget Galton** why his debut play deals with sexual grooming in his home town

As a testbed for experimental plays by emerging writers, Hampstead Theatre's downstairs studio can respond to pressing social issues with highly topical work.

Phil Davies' debut *Firebird*, which deals with the sexual grooming of teens in his home town of Rochdale, firmly falls into that category.

Helmed by artistic director Edward Hall, the three hander explores the tangled relationships between mouthy, vulnerable teen Tia, her friend Katie and older AJ who shows her kindness, while exploiting her naivety.

Davies says the 2012 case that saw young victims passed around a ring of men for sex made him think of his own schooldays.

"When I was 14 it was totally normal for girls in my class to leave school and get into a 4X4. I remember thinking how annoying that girls wouldn't go out with boys their own age, but looking

back through the prism of these court cases I now have horrible pangs that girls I knew would have been going through things like that. But no-one thought of it, or it was tucked so far back into people's consciousness they weren't willing to confront it."

Researching similar cases elsewhere, Davies spotted a common victim profile – and police attitude.

"The way they looked at the girls is one of the most heartbreaking aspects. They put it down to lifestyle choices 'If they want to go out there and be prostitutes, that's their choice'. They asked one girl how short her nightie was. As if to say she was asking for it. She was 13. That seems unbelievable now and wouldn't have happened to a teenager from a stable home in Hampstead who could look after herself. These girls were from difficult backgrounds and broken homes, they were vulnerable and needed help the most, but police washed their hands of them."



■ Callie Cook as Tia in *Firebird*

The cases have firmed up for law enforcers the belief that it's legally impossible to consent to sex if you are under 16 – and ushered in a new offence of street grooming. While some cases were opportunistic, in others the men calculatedly targeted young girls, sometimes using younger men to earn their trust.

Writing about those perpetrators was more problematic due to the controversy around the predominantly Pakistani men involved in Rochdale.

"It's a difficult area to explore why a certain perpetrator was convicted. I don't want to create something a nasty right wing

person can get hold of, but I'm equally aware that police didn't act for fear of being prejudiced." Davies thinks it's less about the ethnic background of abusers and victims and more about opportunity.

"One reason is the night-time economy. The kebab shops and taxis that give access to vulnerable girls wandering the streets late at night are run by people of Pakistani heritage; and Muslim girls are not on the streets.

"In the Netherlands there's been similar cases, it's been Moroccans and Algerians because they work in those places." While it would be "disingenuous" not to admit these

are all Muslim countries, Davies is careful to say: "I don't think Islam has anything to do with why men do this. Ultimately their profile is that they are men. It's a difficult balance but I decided only to include facts selected to create an argument, and tried to be careful."

And while it's "a grim subject", he hates as a theatregoer being faced with unremittingly bleak material. "I don't like theatre that feels like an assault. Young people can be really funny even in the darkest of places. I hope I show there is light, and a sense of hope."

■ *Firebird* runs until October 24 at Hampstead Theatre.

A 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* – stokes the fallout between spurned writer Medea and her 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)



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

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; from the chorus of cliquy yummy-mummies to her weaselling husband (conceitedly played by Justin Salinger), her refusal to suffer in silence is seen not just as undignified, but as the reason for what has befallen her.

As the mood darkens, and Adam Cork's noir score builds with cinematic intensity, Fleetwood ascends to career-peaking depths of terrifying power. The children (maturely played tonight by Lukas Rolfe and Sam Smith) are caught up in her tornado – both cursing

and sharing her grief.

In a nod to the play's classical heritage, its climax sees Charlotte Randler appears as the messenger; but while she verbosely delivers a neat twist on the conclusion, it is diluted 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 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

Unfunny, obvious satire offers nothing new on Brand furore

DARK TOURISM
PARK THEATRE
★☆☆☆☆

Back in 2008, Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross prank-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, reality TV and fame-hungry, talentless wannabes. The erosion of private lives and disingenuousness of social media. Our hypocrisy in denouncing the paparazzi but poring over their snaps, illustrated by a Princess Di reference.

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. Lucy Kirkwood offered more nuanced exploration in *NSFW* at the Royal Court three years ago.

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. A confrontation with Becky, object of their "banter", is passionately delivered by Josie Dunn and Huw Parmenter, but feels like educational role-play.

Sketchy subplots see a ditzzy X Factor product milking her 15 seconds of manufactured fame, an American actress fighting a career slump, one PR stuck in a bizarre feud with an entertainment reporter; and another suffering a midlife crisis. The latter quoting – and thus inviting comparison with – the mighty Network is unwise.

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**