### **Reviews:**Theatre

# Unsubtle Tartuffe update misses target

A WOLF IN SNAKESKIN SHOES **TRICYCLE THEATRE** 

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ast year, American playwright Marcus Gardley scored a hit at the Tricycle by transporting Lorca to 19th-century New Orleans. His loose adaptation of Molière's Tartuffe seemed equally promising - the hypocritical religious devotee becoming a Deep South charlatan preacher. But in Indhu Rubasingham's unrelentingly broad production, the original's subversive message is sacrificed for toothless slapstick.

Despite updating to the present Gardley's is an old-fashioned piece, weirdly reminiscent of the creaky sex farce parodied in Noises Off. Apostle Toof chases nubile blondes and ineptly hides them from his formidable wife, while the wealthy family he infiltrates in hopes of funding his church are a collection of irred types: tyrannical tycoon, ex-stripper fiancé, Mexican maid, flamboyantly gay son, and daughter parading her newly discovered African roots like an insufferable gap



■ Lucien Msamati as Toof picture: Mark Douet

year student. Subplots collide and fizzle in a breathless stream, characterised by cartoonish eavesdropping, plotting and soap operatic confrontations; like an unsubtle episode of Empire, played at deafening volume. There are also dodgy accents and sudden tonal lurches, with Gardley referencing gender inequality, homophobia and – interesting from a real-life son a preacher man – religious disillusionment in the face of an uncaring modern world.

The gospel interludes are enjoyable, as is the musicality of Gardley's rich and rolling verse. The mighty Sharon D Clarke leads the singing and provides the best scene, a face-off with voluptuous Adjoa, while Lucian Msamati is a persuasively devious Toof. More a mixed bag of sketches than a cohesive play, the pantomime quality means Molière's real target – dangerous reliance on blind faith – emerges unscathed.

Marianka Swain

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### A schmaltzy sizzling hit

IN THE HEIGHTS KING'S CROSS THEATRE

King's Cross, our latest "new city quarter", is an apt setting for this 2008 Tony Award winner, which focuses on New York's Dominican-dominated Washington Heights. The local immigrant population values their close-knit community, but gentrification threatens: as rents rise, the hipsters invade, and businesses and residents are priced out.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton is a current Broadway sensation, and this earlier piece shows why. His score is a propulsive, richly textured fusion of hip-hop, rap, pop and Latin: musical theatre for the 21st century. West Side Story casts a long shadow, however, and Quiara Alegría Hudes' book can't compete, reducing hardship to Disney fable. There's no drugs or serious crime, and all problems are solved by a group hug and fortuitous lottery win - a dreamy version of the American Dream.



■ Antoine Murray-Straughan as Graffiti Pete pic: Johan Persson

But Miranda's innovative numbers thoughtfully address multicultural identity: how do you define who you are when

you're not sure where is home. Luke Sheppard's Southwark Playhouse production is cleverly reconfigured for King's Cross (played in rep with The Railway Children). The sound balance is better, the traverse staging immersive, and Drew McOnie's pulsating choreography remains a big sell. Athletic aerials, racy club salsa, expressive contemporary and silky-smooth partnering grow organically out of the storytelling, while maintaining a freewheeling

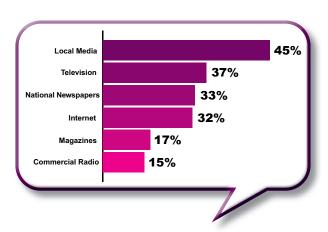
Sam Mackay's hodegaowner Usnavi is a charismatic guide, while Lily Frazer and Joe Aaron Reid's star-crossed lovers – one running from Stanford, the other seeking acceptance - provide soulful singing and unaffected performances. David Bedella brings gravitas as her conflicted father, ex-Sugababe Jade Ewen offers a strong presence if strained vocals, and Cleve September smooth moves. But two strong, sensual women dominate: Josie Benson and Victoria Hamilton-Barritt, the latter astonishingly five months pregnant. Schmaltzy, yes, but an irresistible sizzling hit.

Marianka Swain

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