

# Gripping slick revival of tricky spy thriller

Stoppard's least performed play has a difficult reputation but Howard Davies' masterful production brings clarity to a heady mix of physics and espionage

**HAPGOOD  
HAMPSTEAD THEATRE**

★★★★☆

**A**lmost 30 years after its frostily received premiere, Stoppard's spy drama has come in from the cold. Howard Davies' slick Hampstead revival brings clarity to the initially bewildering combination of physics, philosophy and postmodern *Le Carré* romp, creating a production that works equally as self-deconstructing pastiche and engrossing, cinematic thriller.

We begin with a surveillance op gone wrong. The suspicious CIA observe the British spooks, whose Soviet double agent may have switched back to the other side. Or is there a mole in their own back garden? Stoppard illustrates boyish glee in the staples of spy fiction, as well as acknowledging its absurdities via Russian physicist Joe – both his actual name and the slang term for asset.

He's one of two Joes, the second being the young son of Elizabeth Hapgood, the female intelligence chief who, in 1988, preceded Stella Rimington and Judi Dench's M. Duality fuels the play, from twins and doublespeak to matter/antimatter, truth/lies and personal/professional. Stoppard's contention that we all hold a mass of contradictions honours the moral ambiguity championed by *Le Carré*.

Added to that is a welcome emotional dimension, with Lisa Dillon's fearsomely intelligent, multitasking single mum (also "Mother" to her team) producing glimpses of a chaotic, achingly vulnerable private life.



■ Lisa Dillon as Hapgood

picture: Alastair Muir

There's poignancy, too, in the futility of their actions, fighting to protect possibly meaningless research at the tail end of a dwindling Cold War.

Alec Newman passionately conveys Stoppard's scientific analogies, though they sometimes stall the action, while Tim McMullan is a wonderfully dry British spymaster and Gary Beadle his brash American

opposite.

Ian William Galloway's video design adds contemporary paranoia to Ashley Martin-Davis's elegant sets, as well as emphasising Stoppard's preoccupation with performance and perception, whether in espionage, theatre or our own intimate encounters.

Marianka Swain



■ The cast of *Pride and Prejudice*

picture: Nicky Christensen

## Bawdy panto is pure filthy fun

**PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: THE PANTO  
COCKPIT THEATRE**

★★★★☆

For single twenty-something female Londoners this riotously filthy panto really spoke to us.

Co writer and artistic director James Walker-Black plays Mrs Bennet as the most outrageously bawdy dame eager to marry off her five single daughters.

The panto villain is Charles Dickens who competes with Jane Austen (Freya Evans) for control over the character's romantic fortunes.

It's full of topical references, to contemporary London life and the year's pop culture with song and dance numbers from Taylor Swift to Caroline Bingley's Pussy Cat Dolls *Dontcha?* routine a highlight.

Mr Bingley is played by a charming broom (with Made-In-Chelsea toff accent) perfectly ventriloquised by his creator Austen, and special mention should go to Ella Garland's thrusting, Lord Flash-heart-inspired Mr Wickham, who brought a hilarious twist to the

rollicking tale of his flirtation with sock puppet Lydia. (Sheereen Roushbaiani, who also embodies sisters Kitty and Mary)

As with all good pantos, audience interaction abounds – sometimes rather close to the "bone", including a memorable blind date skit hosted by Mrs Bennet, where Elizabeth opts for a game audience member (on our night a management consultant who "doesn't know what he's doing").

Instead she's awarded a cringy blind date with simpering Mr Collins (David Bullen, also co-artistic director)

With many standout individual performances there's a clear ensemble chemistry among a cast that brings this low-budget, high-octane panto to life.

The only gripe is that it's reliant on high levels of audience participation which could be limited when the house isn't packed to the rafters.

With its adult humour it's definitely not for kids, shockable grannies or Austen purists but for everyone else it's a great night out.

Hannah McGrath and Imogen Blake

## Heart-warming ode to the sea is a real delight

**SNAIL AND THE WHALE  
JACKSONS LANE**

★★★★☆

With their heart-warming adaptation of *The Snail and the Whale* now playing at Jackson's Lane, theatre company Tall Stories who are based at the venue, have scored another hit with their faithful but inventive take on this classic by Julia Donaldson and Alex Scheffer.

Cleverly setting up the narrative through a young girl's point of view, the story plays on two levels: the girl's love for her absent sea-faring father who sends her a CD of him

reading the story, prompting her to remember how they used to re-enact scenes, alongside the staging of the tale itself.

Tall Stories excels at the flexible use of props: the cupboards become a whale, a toy snail is carried by the girl like a rucksack as she plays out the story of the adventurous snail who hitches a lift on the tail of a kindly humpback.

The set-up is a bit drawn out but the four-plus audience were delighted with plenty of 'she's behind you' panto participation as the girl tries to avoid bed-time by scrambling amongst audience members' legs.

The children went wild when the actors sprayed audience members with water guns to conjure up showering the whale when he's beached and needs rescuing.

With a huge porthole centre-stage, a dreamy seaside-themed bedroom, magical lighting shifts and a violinist accompanying the story conjuring up seagulls and whales, as well as a score of classic sea songs, this ode to the sea is a real delight.

Caroline David

■ The cast of *Snail and the Whale* at Jacksons Lane

