

Reviews: Theatre

Puns and belly laughs in hammed up Hur

BEN HUR
TRICYCLE THEATRE
★★★★☆

There are groanworthy puns, silly gags and belly laughs aplenty in this boiled down, hammed up version of the sword and sandals epic.

Framed as a shoestring production by an amateur theatre company, General Lew Wallace's story of a Roman prince who becomes a galley slave then triumphs in the Circus Maximus is interspersed with the bickering rivalry between a self-aggrandizing actor/manager and his troupe.

In his work with the National Theatre of Brent, and at the Tricycle with the phenomenally successful *The 39 Steps*, writer Patrick Barlow has long enjoyed pricking the bubble of thespian pomposity and yanking back the wizard's curtain to expose theatrical artifice. He also loves testing performers' mettle with multiple roles. Here four brilliantly versatile actors pull off the story, often by pulling off wigs, beards and hats mid-scene to hilarious effect.

At one stage the audience



Richard Durden and John Hopkins picture: Mark Douet

is co-opted as galley slaves and given lines to shout out. In another the lone actress alternates three roles with head-spinning effect. The famous chariot race is staged with dummy horses driven by lawnmowers - the smallness of the cast evidently boosted the costume and set budget.

The portentous tone of William Wyler's 1959 film lends itself well to a treatment that's one part panto, two parts Carry On, with a dash of Monty Python.

There are saggy bits in Tim Carroll's production as plot takes over from frenzy, and some of Barlow's witty wordplay will go over the head of the under 10s. But while the periodic appearances of Jesus - we get the nativity and the resurrection - are funny, the Messiah is something of the straight guy here, making this oddly appropriate Christmas fare. Highly recommended as a adult treat you can safely take kids along to.

Bridget Galton

Pertinent politics but sterile play of ideas

WASTE
NATIONAL THEATRE
★★★★☆

A principled reformer destroyed by a combination of sex scandal, religious hypocrisy and machine politics: Harvey Granville Barker's drama, banned by the Lord Chamberlain in 1907, still feels eerily pertinent. However, in Roger Michell's arid production of this overlong play, the present-day parallels are more interesting than stirring.

Independent MP Henry Trebell is on a mission to disestablish the Church of England, and strikes a deal with the Tory party to secure them a majority in return for support for his Bill. But social revolution and a budding career are laid to waste by his passionless fling with an unhappily married coquette, which results in a tragically botched backstreet abortion. Barker's play chillingly evokes the backroom trading of the governing elite.



Charles Edwards in Waste picture: Johan Persson

It's a world of pragmatic, sometimes callous compromise, far removed from those who put them in power, and from the idyllic view of democracy. But too much is communicated via interminable Shavian sermons, and though the

narrow demographic - privileged, male and pale - is representative, it adds to the remoteness of the piece.

Charles Edwards is convincingly blinkered as Trebell, while Michael Elwyn provides a crafty leader and Gerrard McArthur an aristocratic moralist. But a reflection of the prevailing sexism short-changes the actresses. Olivia Williams is stuck with a deliberately aggravating character - hysterical Amy, trapped in a role prescribed by men - Sylvestra Le Touzel is limited as Trebell's devoted sister, and Lucy Robinson's promising Lady Julia, billed as the power behind the throne, appears in the opening scene and then vanishes without trace.

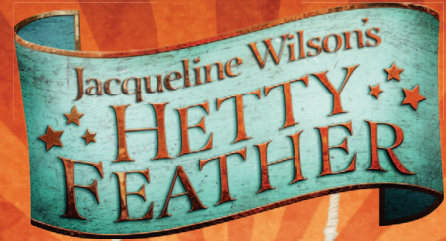
Hildegard Bechtler's giant, monochromatic set muffles the emotional moments, contributing to a sleek, educational but overly sterile evening. Trebell is more interested in ideas than people, and so, on this evidence, is Barker. Marianka Swain

OPENS NEXT WEEK!

★★★★★
'SPELLBINDING'
Daily Mail

★★★★★
'SPECTACULAR'
The Times

★★★★★
'MAGNIFICENT'
Evening Standard



★★★★★
'Gives Matilda a run for its money'
Daily Telegraph



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