

Reviews : Theatre

Charming Arterton's high spirited romp

NELL GYWNN
APOLLO THEATRE
★★★★☆

Plays about 17th and 18th century theatre folk seem all the rage these days with *Red Velvet* and *Mr Foote's Other Leg* making great hay of the backstage camaraderie and mannered acting.

Jessica Swale's exuberant, entertaining offering, originally staged at The Globe visits restoration theatre at the moment women were first allowed on stage (by order of the King).

Cue the swift promotion of saucy Drury Lane orange seller Nell to leading comic actress and thence Charles II's mistress.

Just as *Red Velvet* explores the seismic effect when reality – a black man playing Othello – intrudes on an artificial medium, so Swale's feminist inflected drama investigates how women's bodies on stage changed both plays and audiences.

As Greg Haiste's hysterical thesp Edward Kynaston shrieks that no-one can play a woman as well as he and argues "people come to the Playhouse to engage



■ Gemma Arterton as Nell Gwynn

Picture: Tristram Kenton

with the imaginary," Nell urges playwright John Dryden to better reflect how real women might react in his scenes.

Swale and director Christopher Luscombe's problem is this subtler project is jettisoned for a lighthearted bawdy romp complete with Hugh Durrant's glittering costumes, live music and Nigel Hess' jolly songs.

The gags feel somewhat belaboured in a first half that still has fun with the havoc of showbusiness. Gemma Arterton has bags of cheeky charm as

our shrewd, feisty heroine – you really care when she hits a hard place.

Act II ushers in courtly politics and David Sturzaker's droll Charles hints at an isolated figure who genuinely falls for our unaffected working class Nell.

It's best when affectionately satirising luvvies and peppering in contemporary gags but I was waiting for a scene where Nell performed one of Dryden's quick-witted comic heroines. It never came.

Bridget Galton

Brash but glib puppet tale

HAND TO GOD
VAUDEVILLE THEATRE
★★★★☆

Move over, Avenue Q: there's a new puppet in town. Flame-haired, foul-mouthed Tyrone, star of Robert Askins' semi-autobiographical farce, is a nightmarish creation, but a necessary release for cowed Texas teen Jason, struggling with the death of his father. Mother Margery focuses on Christian puppet ministry rather than addressing their grief, but the diversionary tactic fails when Tyrone switches from Bible stories to voicing Jason's repressed feelings: lust for fellow student Jessica and anger at his hypocritical authority figures.

As Tyrone's sentience grows into an Exorcist-like reign of terror that includes exploded lights and crucified Barbies, it's ascribed to Satanic possession. But Askins astutely points out the danger of evading responsibility by externalising our demons. Religion's collective morality often



■ Harry Melling as Jason

Picture: Tristram Kenton

means passing judgement on difficult behaviour; instead of acknowledging a cry for help.

However, rather than digging deeper into these ideas, Askins goes bigger; brasher and bloodier with each cartoonish set piece – frequently hilarious in Moritz von Stuelpnagel's high-voltage production, but selling short his characters and serious issues like mental illness.

Practising Christian Janie Dee connects with Margery's crisis of faith, and Kevin Mains is endearing as horndog adolescent Timothy, though the physical comedy of their illicit hook-up needs refining. Neil Pearson's lonely pastor and Jemima Rooper's

sensible Jessica, whose nymphet puppet resembles Dolly Parton, are nicely grounded but underused. This is Melling's show, and his technically accomplished rendition of the "Dr Jekyll and Miss Piggy" split personality is phenomenal – a tragicomic tour de force.

There are production niggles to address, like inconsistent accents and Beowulf Boritt's revolving set, which stalled on press night. Askins' scattershot puerility won't be to everyone's taste, but beneath the graphic surface is a heartfelt exhortation to voice our problems and find the help we need.

Marianka Swain

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