

'Good theatre should be provocative'

■ Jemima Rooper in Hand to God



After stunning American audiences, *Hand to God* has arrived to scandalise the West End. Archway actress Jemima Rooper tells **Marianka Swain** why a Satanic sock puppet lured her back to the stage after having a baby

"It's completely unique," explains Jemima Rooper of *Hand to God*. "The most perfect play in terms of structure and themes – plus, the puppet element. I had a baby last May, so I wasn't looking for a long West End run, but when I read the first line, I thought 'Oh no. I really, really like this.'"

Robert Askins' play, which began Off-Off-Broadway in 2011, is based on childhood experience of assisting his mother in her Christian puppet ministry – spreading the word via Sesame Street-like skits.

Following the death of his father, Askins descended into booze; *Hand to God*'s bereaved Jason instead lashes out through Tyrone, his increasingly foul-mouthed puppet.

"Underneath the controversial stuff, it's a beautiful piece with a big heart," says Rooper. "I'm a firm believer that you can't have tragedy without comedy, and Robert handles those extremes brilliantly. People fixate on the religious aspect, but it's really about family relationships and how we deal – or don't – with our demons. Too many people fall into self-destructive behaviour, like drink or drugs, so I hope audiences leave thinking 'I mustn't let that happen to me.'"

The fundamentalist Christianity that underpins the play's small-town Texas life is more familiar to

American audiences, but Rooper thinks us Brits can relate. "Instead of religious repression, we have the stiff upper lip which doesn't always allow us to say 'I'm not coping, help me.' When this puppet starts raining down chaos, you get this incredible release – there's real cathartic power in voicing things no one dares say."

As Rooper's character Jessica is relatively inexperienced in puppetry, "I can get away with a less good version than Harry Melling, who properly plays two characters. One of the Broadway actors taught us the basics over Skype and gave us puppet homework. I did get scared, and it was tough at first in rehearsals because it's so technical. But whatever I've done, I'm always learning from scratch, and hearing the audience response makes it all worthwhile."

Rooper's also thrilled to put this piece in front of people "who might scream in horror: All good theatre should be provocative. We're already seeing younger than normal West End audiences, which is great – people do want to come, but theatre doesn't always speak to them. I hope this encourages other directors and producers to shake things up."

Although Rooper's done a variety of projects, including *The Famous Five*, *As If and Lost in Austen* on TV, *The Black Dahlia* on film and *One Man, Two Guvnors* on stage, she'd love to see a wider range

of parts available for actresses. "I'm not conventionally pretty enough for girlfriend/wife roles, which I'm glad about, but juicy parts are few and far between. I've done a lot of lesbians and cross-dressing – interesting women don't seem to get written unless they're disguised as men or gay. Too often film posters show all white guys with one black actor or one sexy woman. The more blind casting the better – it can revitalise old works. A lot of women together is a very powerful thing, but there just aren't enough opportunities."

One solution is creating her own material, but seeing playwright husband Ben Ockrent toiling away has given her pause. "I do have ideas, so at some point I might get off my arse and make those happen." For now, they're enjoying parenthood in Archway – "I've lived in north London 10 years, and I really appreciate all the green now I'm a mum" – and splitting childcare between them. "We're lucky both our jobs are flexible. It's hard for artists if the other one has a rigid timetable, because you never know day to day what help you're going to need. Though actually I think it's even tougher being a stay at home mum. I'm rehearsing on four hours sleep sometimes, but it's a privilege to come out and do something I love."

■ *Hand to God* is at Vaudeville Theatre until June 11

A heady cocktail 'resuscitates' pub theatre at Lion and Unicorn

Children's theatre, new writing and plays in French for Kentish Town's Gallic community will be staged at the re-opened Lion and Unicorn.

Creative producer Chris Mellor has taken over the pub theatre from previous management Giant Olive.

Camden's King Canute is currently running for young audiences, and from Sunday Mirando sees a naked middle-aged man sprayed silver reclaiming the *Tempest* with a gay subtext.

Mellor says ticket prices will be "accessible" at £10, shows kept short to "increase the drinking time" and £22 meal deals for pre-theatre supper and show will "make sense for the pub".

"I know the theatre and the local

scene. As senior arts officer for Camden I supported venues in the borough with advice on funding and contacts. I am resuscitating the venue, continuing to challenge the local audience and move the theatre forward with new writing and suitable classics. We'll be imaginative but realistic."

Having worked for the Arts Council Mellor can help creative producers to apply for funding for projects, and stage co-productions with other small and medium sized venues.

He admits the uneven quality and underfunding of fringe theatre can be a risk for audiences.

"That's why it's just £10 a ticket.

The challenge for fringe venues is a 60 seat venue is never going to be economically sustainable, you have to get other income streams. The answer lies in trying to attract projects with producers who can work between small and medium scale theatres putting together co-productions and sharing resources.

"It's about supporting and developing emerging producer talent to get a

cohort with the skills and vision to get the bigger resources so you can pay proper wages and rather than just doing a one off show, hopefully move productions on to have another life."

One co-production running from March 13-23 is a 'nostalgic and intimate' backstage look at the last public appearance of *Generation Game* host Larry Grayson.

Three Days and Three Minutes with Larry is written by Mellor and stars Ian Parkin from *4 Poofs* and a Piano and Lee Peart as the spiritual healer he befriended.

Set backstage at the 1994 Royal Variety Show, the show touches on a career that began in the 1950s at a time when presenters could not be openly gay.

Grayson's camp persona found favour in the 1970s with *Shut That Door* and *The Larry Grayson Show*.

Parkin, who spent 20 years in musical theatre before joining *4 Poofs* and a Piano, appearing regularly on *Tonight With Jonathan Ross*, once met Grayson during a summer season in Bournemouth.

"I was 22, he came to do a Sunday concert. We went to see him after the show and he was utterly charming, funny and a delight. He shut himself in the stage door



■ Ian Parkin as Larry Grayson picture: Toby Lee

keeper's office which had a slide up window and stayed there for ages chatting to us and the long line of people waiting for his autograph. He didn't leave until he'd signed everybody's programme."

As a fan Parkin was attracted to playing the comedian: "I really admire stand-up comedians so I found the idea of exploring how one might prepare for an appearance really interesting. Thankfully because I look nothing like him, neither the writer nor the director wanted an impersonation of Larry but to get the essence of the man. The best starting point

was to familiarise myself with his speech patterns and mannerisms. I spent a month watching his Royal Variety performance on YouTube, learning the dialogue, and recording myself until I felt I was as close as I could get."

It's the first time Parkin has portrayed a real person. "It feels a huge responsibility to get it right for his family, friends and fans. I have him at the back of my mind throughout. I'm nervous about it but I loved him so I'm going to do the best I can for him."

Bridget Galton
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■ Larry Grayson in the '70s picture: PA