

Reviews: Calculating Kindness



■ *Calculating Kindness* at the Camden People's Theatre

Picture: Richard Davenport

Hard to invest in tale of altruistic formula

How an American scientist bleakly revealed that kindness is self-interest

CALCULATING KINDNESS
CAMDEN PEOPLE'S THEATRE
★★★★☆

Nepotistic altruism: it sounds like a contradiction in terms. But American scientist George Price produced a mathematical formula – supporting evolutionary biologist WD Hamilton's theory – which proved we're more likely to help close relatives in order to ensure the survival of our genes. Kindness is really self-interest.

Price's bleak discovery contributed to his breakdown and eventual suicide in a Tolmer's Square squat, just yards from Camden People's Theatre. This dense 85-minute play by Laura

Farmworth and Lydia Adetunji (the former directs) was created in concert with British Library, Wellcome Trust and four academic advisors. It's an admirable attempt to communicate complex ideas, filtered through an astonishing biography, but brief scenes short-change the debates and curb dramatic momentum.

Tonal mishmash, from naturalism to winking meta-theatre and surrealism, contributes to a muddled whole. Though sadly rushed, the parallels made between Price's theories and experiences are fascinating.

Abandoning his family for career opportunities in London proves individual interest is often prioritised over collective, while ambivalence towards his involvement in the deadly Manhattan Project haunts

discussion about relative cruelty to strangers. Most intriguing is his desire to find meaningful patterns in events, leading to ruinous philanthropy and the screeching U-turn from atheism to evangelical Christianity. The authors wryly comment on "likeability", but nevertheless give Adam Burton a tough task with the arrogant, blinkered Price, and the perplexingly unreliable narrative makes it difficult to invest in his journey. Neal Craig and Rachael Spence do sterling work in supporting roles. Lucy Sierra's claustrophobic set has clever reveals and produces light flashes, possibly suggestive of synapses firing in Price's teeming brain. Ultimately, however, it's one more element in a stimulating but already overstuffed piece.

Marianka Swain

An intense unsettling night

BUG
FOUND THEATRE 111
★★★★☆

His magnetic performances in *Happy Valley* and *War&Peace* have made James Norton a household name, not to mention a heartthrob.

But does his screen presence transfer as powerfully to the stage? The answer, apparently, is yes.

In this 130-seat, pop-up theatre space on Charing Cross Road, Norton and co-star Kate Fleetwood couldn't be more exposed.

Not only do they frequently strip to their underwear, the audience, seated around this claustrophobic seedy motel room, are virtually within touching distance, as they play two lost souls so convinced that they are infested to the core with bugs that they eventually spiral into insanity.

This revival of Tracy Lett's 1996 play touches at times upon every meaning of the word 'bug'. When awkward, slightly odd Peter (Norton) turns up in lonely, troubled Agnes's Oklahoma motel room, he appears to bring with

him an infestation of aphids.

Peter, who claims to have been in Syria, admits he's 'in trouble with the army' and seems paranoid about surveillance, insisting on drawn curtains, locked doors and – ultimately – tinfoil on the walls to stop 'transmissions'.

The mites appear to crawl under their skin when Peter is most stressed – when he's bugged, basically. And as lightbulbs flicker above us and a buzzing sound grows more present, the audience become agitated – bugged even – in what is an intense and unsettling night out. As cocaine snorting tragic Agnes, the cat-eyed Fleetwood is utterly compelling, while Daisy Lewis as her friend, and Alec Newman as her abusive ex, provide strong support.

An edgy, vulnerable Norton in his pants will inevitably be a draw for some theatre-goers, but when he takes a pair of bloody pliers to wrench out a tooth he insists has been bugged, I suspect even his biggest fans will avert their eyes in horror:

Susanna Joy



■ James Norton and Kate Fleetwood in *Bug* Picture: Simon Annand

Nothing should stop you seeing three hours of pure, thrilling spectacle

LES BLANCS
NATIONAL THEATRE
★★★★★

American playwright Lorraine Hansberry died in 1965 aged only 34. On the evidence of this play, we lost one of the 20th century's great playwrights. Her understanding of race politics was as profound and passionate as of theatre as a craft.

The opening is pure spectacle. Staged in the brutalist Olivier Theatre, there is a skeletal mission building in an unnamed African colony. Four matriarchs shuffle on, singing dirges: the chorus to the three thrilling hours ahead.

We meet American journalist Charlie Morris, who has come

to write about humanitarian work, and Tshembe Matoseh, who returns after a spell in Europe and the States to bury his father.

Then there's repulsive colonial officer Major Rice who, relishing his imperialist "burden", professes to love the simple savages. But his sidearm is ever cocked in this unsettled colony.

Tshembe and Morris debate imperialism and nationalism, black and white relations, and Morris's white liberal attitudes: "You come for your salvation at Africa's expense," says Tshembe. And so it goes: religion, education, kinship, violence – all come under Hansberry's forensic examination. Drew Lichtenberg writes of Hansberry: "She sought

to create an African Classicism in which a burgeoning political consciousness was accompanied by aesthetic breakthrough." I believe she succeeded. Apart from the over-arching political themes, she also deals with family, responsibility, divided loyalties, belonging, and self-doubt, all with precision and economy. Yael Farber's superb direction and staging are an epic achievement, jaw dropping in its ambition and execution. The acting is inspired. Sian Phillips, measured as the blind Madame Neilsen, has some of the best lines. Danny Sapani as Tshembe has great presence and passion. Nothing should stop you seeing this play.

David Winskill



■ A scene from *Les Blancs*

Picture: Johan Persson