

Theatre: Reviews

Hard to invest in tale of altruistic formula

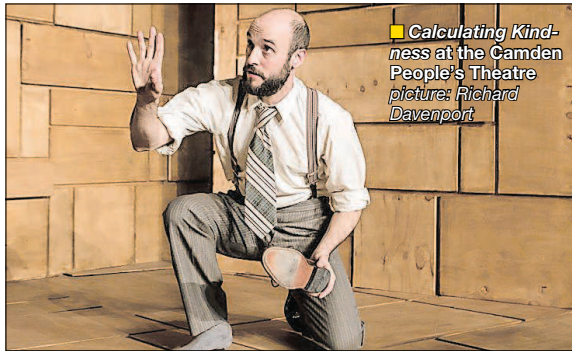
How an American scientist bleakly revealed that kindness is self-interest

**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 out

**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 Letts's 1996 play touches at times upon



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

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

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