

## Theatre: Reviews



■ A scene from *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*  
Picture: Idil Sukan/Draw

# Pay attention to big ideas in sharp script

Clever story of missionary who visits jungle to convert Amazon tribe

**DON'T SLEEP, THERE ARE SNAKES**  
**PARK THEATRE**  
★★★★☆

Daniel Everett is the kind of guy to scream and shout: 'Alleluia'. It is 1972: he is both missionary and linguist, preparing to go into the Amazon jungle to convert the Pirahã tribe.

He is advised by his sponsoring supervisor at Mission HQ that "they have to be made lost before they can be found".

At first this feels like a Friday night faith youth club production: relentlessly optimistic, rictus smiles and lashings of frothy coffee afterwards.

But gradually you realise you are watching a very clever piece of storytelling with sophisticated

stage craft. The set is sparse with a few endlessly recycled props: a rope held at arm's length by the cast catenaries, map like, into the course of the Amazon. Minutes later, it is the prow of a river boat.

In several laugh-out-loud scenes, Everett, played with a wonderful combination of thought and energy by Mark Arends, works to learn the Pirahã language and win the tribe's souls. Gradually he realises they have no concept of numbers or time – they live in a continual present (cue the rope to explain verb tenses), have a totally uninhibited attitude to sex ("Fancy a tug?") and no word for worry. They have no creation myth and their grammar doesn't allow for recursive discourse. Everett must wonder if he's stepped into a

Garden of Eden.

These indicators lead him not only to question his own faith but also Noam Chomsky's theories of language – what it is that separates us from beasts. In a debate with an American linguist (played with a tour de force of fast talking and assured erudition by Rachel Henshaw), he argues about the concept of being human.

The ending is sad and, at only 90 minutes, the play is too short. It deals in big ideas and room should have been found to better explore Everett's loss of faith, and the tricky relationship between civilisation and people in the developing world. A terrific play with a razor sharp script and fine acting. Prepare to pay attention.

David Winskill



■ Paul Kemp and Emily Burnett in *Beacons*

Picture: Scott Rylander

# Gentle tale evokes Last of Summer Wine

**BEACONS**  
**PARK 90**  
★★★★☆

We are in Eastbourne, at Julie's Ices Kiosk. A modest affair, close to the edge of Beachy Head: room for two inside with jolly Disney characters attacking oversized lollies painted on the outside. The eponymous Julie (played with an air of resignation and minted jollity by Tessa Peake-Jones) is finding it hard making a living – lack of council investment, cut-throat local competition and coastal erosion. Yes, her business could go down at any minute.

We meet the dour, middle-aged Bernard. A Sheffield man, he is played with bluster by Paul Kemp but hides a vulnerability and hollowness. Julie is knitting him a

# Dark portrait of addiction

**PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS**  
**WYNDHAM'S THEATRE**  
★★★★☆

Emma lies, professionally and pathologically. She's a struggling actress, and her zeal for living lives other than her own is the biggest barrier to her recovery from drugs and alcohol addiction.

Duncan Macmillan's searing piece, which transfers after a sold-out National Theatre run, is dizzyingly metatheatrical, unpicking layers of stage artifice to illustrate the stripping back of the rehab process.

Denise Gough's gives a star-making turn as slippery Emma. It's a physical tour-de-force, withdrawal manifesting in jittery tics and a compulsive desire to wrench herself out of her body, and Gough fully earns our emotional investment by not once courting it. She fearlessly embraces the character's abrasive swagger, smart-alec scepticism and messy contradictions.

Emma rails against AA's insistence on a higher power – how will spiritual surrender help her regain agency? – and Macmillan maintains a fascinating ambivalence towards the 12-step programme, equal

parts cure and cult. If addicts use to avoid reality, surely swapping relapse triggers (the titular people, places and things) for the AA bubble is a limited solution. And is theatre a path to truth, or just another escapist drug? Part of the audience is seated onstage, so we're reflected back at ourselves, uncomfortably cast as possible enablers.

Jeremy Herrin's *Headlong* production vividly illustrates Emma's subjective experience. Hallucinatory bricks fly out of the walls of Bunny Christie's clinical white-tiled set, multiple Emmas appear from nowhere, and Tom Gibbons' pounding soundscape drowns out those trying to help. Though the supporting characters are underdeveloped, Nathaniel Martello-White's shrewd veteran impresses, as do Barbara Marten's resolute authority figures and Kevin McMonagle's taciturn parent.

Macmillan sometimes overeggs the metaphors, but Gough gives his discourse a visceral immediacy. There's no easy closure in this unflinching, darkly funny and heartbreaking portrait – Emma's work is only just beginning.

Marianka Swain



■ Denise Gough as Emma in *People Places and Things*  
Picture: Johan Persson

birthday jumper. The third member of this happy band is Skye: young, fresh faced, inquisitive, cheeky. She seems to have been taken under Julie's wing and they have a warm, mutually supportive relationship. But, with all three we feel there is a back story, a connection that isn't quite right: why is Skye hanging around with these two?

I'm not going to tell you how things resolve, but Beachy Head is notorious for suicides and Julie is part of a suicide watch patrol.

Older readers will remember the first series of *Last of the Summer Wine*, before it degenerated into Yorkshire slapstick. It was lyrical, soft, observational and conversational humour in search of quiet chuckles, not thigh slapping ribaldry. Tabitha Mortiboy's script

achieves much the same effect: gentle humour and warmth carries the underlying sense of suspected failure.

Attic Theatre Company produced *Beacons* as a short play then worked with Mortiboy to develop it into a full length play. At 90 minutes, you still feel it needed more time to explore the characters; there were too many unanswered background questions.

But *Beacons* witnesses the start of two fine careers. Mortiboy is only just out of college and has produced a script of exceptional maturity and insight. And Emily Burnett, 18, has had no formal training and delivers a brilliant, mature and knowing performance as Skye.

Two to watch.

David Winskill