

Reviews : Theatre

Style over substance but Lily shines fresh

ROMEO AND JULIET
GARRICK THEATRE
★★★★☆

For his latest Shakespearean venture, Kenneth Branagh has produced a panting paean to Fellini, with all the cultural nuance of a Simpsons episode. While ravishing, his transposition of the action to 50s Italy is notable more for the fabulous fashions and stylish espresso cups than any great insight into the play.

Casting screen stars as the star-crossed lovers yields mixed results. Game of Thrones's Richard Madden makes Romeo a bland, nice chap – far too ploddingly British for the heaving passions of Branagh and co-director Rob Ashford's vision – and he exhibits little chemistry with Lily James, though she was previously Cinderella to his Prince in Branagh's film. However, James superbly charts a clear journey from child – turning cartwheels and shifting from foot to foot while being lectured – to awestruck lover and finally doomed wife, steely resolve building with each new betrayal.



Richard Madden and Lily James picture: Johan Persson

Eyebrows were raised at the casting of 77-year-old Derek Jacobi as Mercutio, but his is the liveliest performance of the bunch. He croons, prances, minces, whips a sword out of his walking stick, and delivers putdowns as though expecting a laugh track. Marvellously entertaining, but his ill-defined relationship with Romeo means his demise lacks impact. Meera Syal's bawdy nurse is similarly broad, though effective when hinting at the guardian's fatal cowardice. There are strong

supporting performances from Jack Colgrave Hirst's restless Benvolio, Ansu Kabia's seething Tybalt, Michael Rouse's brutish Capulet and Samuel Valentine's youthful Friar. Christopher Oram's Italianate architecture is beautiful but fussy, and the production doesn't trust its audience to stay engaged, adding overwrought music from Patrick Doyle, a dubious cabaret number and a surfeit of atmospheric candles. Beautiful but not great tragedy.

Marianka Swain

Satire of state of politics

A VIEW FROM ISLINGTON NORTH
ARTS THEATRE
★★★★☆

Most of north London's politeratti seemed to have turned out for this satire-fest of five shorts by Mark Ravenhill, Caryl Churchill, Alistair Beaton, David Hare, and Stella Feehily.

The playlets under the collective title references the constituency of Labour's leader – perhaps a little opportunistic as only one of the plays (Beaton's *The Accidental Leader*) is actually about Jeremy.

Set in a room above a pub, Old Labour Hack Jim is choreographer to a dirty dozen of Labour MPs, coordinating their resignations from the Shadow Cabinet to force a leadership challenge. Feisty Impetus activist Nina challenges the Blair inheritance and concedes the chaos of JC's leadership "but it has hope." The coup fails.

Post interval, the most surreal of the quintet, David Hare's *Ayn Rand Takes a Stand*



How to Get Ahead in Politics picture: Robert Workman

is an imaginary dialogue between Ayn Rand (played with quivering, voracious sexuality by Ann Mitchell) and Gideon (George) Osborne about freedom – markets, speech, movement and love. Jane Wymark's Therese joins them and brutally exposes the inconsistencies and hypocrisy of the Tory right.

Caryl Churchill's *Tickets are Now on Sale* is a clever exercise in word play using jargon and euphemism from business, marketing, politics and the financial worlds: corporate bollocks to political effect! More hypocrisy in Stella Feehily's very funny *How to get Ahead in Politics*: a snapshot of how Tories

deal with sexist behaviour, patronise minorities and look after their own.

The evening opened with Mark Ravenhill's disturbing *The Mother*. An audience primed to laugh grew unsure as a deeply disturbing portrait of daytime television Britain developed. Dressing-gown clad Sarah Alexander is visited by two uniformed soldiers to give her the ultimate bad news about her son. She is off her face on anti-depressants and a foul mouthed tirade of abuse prevents them delivering their carefully scripted piece about dying for freedom and his country. A brilliant performance.

David Winskill

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