

WHAT'S ON THE CRITICS

THEATRE REVIEW



■ Jessica Regan and Michelle Terry as Henry V

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

France England clash is timely and thoughtful

Henry V
Regent's Park Open Air Theatre
★★★★☆

Shakespeare's ever-topical examination of national identity and international relationships feels extraordinarily pertinent right now. Robert Hastie's thoughtful version is anchored by the inspired cross-casting of Michelle Terry as a reflective young monarch. This Henry is not gender specific, but there are new resonances in the play, from the mansplaining advisors and Salic Law discussion to France's casual dismissal.

More fool them: Terry's Henry grows into a formidable tactician. Her excellent verse speaking makes

the oratory sing, though the St Crispin's Day speech is cleverly delivered as a personal appeal – but this is a king who feels the weight of lives lost. She's capable of making tough decisions, and her mounting fury at the Dauphin's mocking gift of tennis balls is chilling, but there's no empty jingoism. Hastie's immersive and increasingly expressionistic production similarly ensures that war is not glorified. Soldiers spill out into the audience, drummers pound a blood-pumping rhythm, and speakers make the "blast of war" blow in our ears. Anna Fleische plunges the action into swampy puddles, and Joshua Carr's rising floodlights silhouette ghostly tableaux. The marking of mass

graves sombrely recalls World War I battlefields, tempering victory with mourning. The singing of the Non Nobis Domine is spine-tingling.

There are strong supporting turns from Charlotte Cornwell's world-weary Chorus, David Sibley's wily Canterbury, Jessica Regan's humbled Montjoy, Philip Arditti's swaggering Pistol, and Ben Wiggins's capricious Princess Katherine, toying with performative feminine qualities as Terry does male in a courtship with real frisson. Their resulting union, echoing that of their nations, is an imperfect but necessary step towards peace. Terry's Henry keeps an eye on both history and legacy. Can we say the same?

Marianka Swain

relinquished our own privacy in return for free stuff, are rehearsed in a string of dialogues.

Despite James McDonald's efforts to inject tension, it's a mite too smart-talky and static. Some of it would work just as well on the radio.

Caoilfhionn Dunne as The Woman does her best to mine the piece's flip humour, veering from sarcastic and needling to menacing. But she doesn't always strike the right balance between them.

And Jack Farthing as the fugitive computer geek turned public enemy segues from wary to paranoid as he realises how completely he's relinquished his own freedom.

Miriam Buether's set provides a spectacular coup de theatre that metaphorically and literally rips away the foundations for Andrew's beliefs and embodies his limbo. But all of the playing around with who is who, necessarily ditches characterisation and Andrew becomes merely a blank canvas on which to throw ideas. A diverting rather than riveting night out.

Bridget Galton

THEATRE REVIEW

Leaks, geeks and spooks

Wild
Hampstead Theatre
★★★★☆

In a Russian hotel room, a US government whistleblower with obvious similarities to Edward Snowden is visited by the kooky British representative of an organisation very like WikiLeaks.

Later a creepily intense second man, will visit the American, claiming to be from the same organisation, but denying knowledge of the previous woman.

For no obvious reason, the pair mess with his head. Do they want him as a spokesman for their loosely anarchist group? Are they winding him up? *Spooks?* Fingments of his fevered imagination?

Charles III and *Doctor Foster* writer Mike Bartlett is trying to keep him and us guessing about who to trust and who's watching who in our surveillance society.

Arguments about Andrew's and the organisation's motives and beliefs, about the slippery, shifting contract between governments and their spied upon subjects in the name of keeping us safe, and about how we've

■ Caoilfhionn Dunne and Jack Farthing in *Wild*
Picture: STEPHEN CUMMISKEY



CIRCUS REVIEW

Party with a Brian Blessed Morris dancer

Barbu
London Wonderground
Southbank
★★★★☆

Have you ever had a dream where a physically ripped Brian Blessed-lookalike Morris dances balletically in front of you? How about four of them? No? Of course you haven't, that's just weird. But if it happened, you'd be tempted to watch, right?

Welcome to Barbu. This show, from Canada's Cirque Alfonse, is a spectacle of brawn, balance, bawdiness, beards and the bizarre. Stylistically, a throw-back to Victorian strongman acts, Barbu combines skilful acrobatics, impressive feats of

balance and strength, and a magic performance that is an uproarious delight. This traditional circus-cum-cabaret has been pumped full of pace and absurdist humour, making it a relentless and breath-taking spectacle. Backed by a thumping soundtrack from a live band – a mix of folk and electronic rock that alone can get your foot tapping – four hirsute gentleman, two elegant ladies and one "mental-ist," have choreographed a rapid-fire set of routines combining roller-skating, trapeze artistry, human pyramids, juggling and conjuring that leave mouths open with as much of a "how the..." expression as "what the..."

However, Barbu's true joy is how close the audience feel to the troupe. Aside from the mere proximity of the performers, this highly professional show is full of silly running jokes, pretend mishaps, and random childish antics that encourage you to root for every trick and set-piece to come off.

This show doesn't take itself too seriously, and the result is a feeling that you are watching your crazy best friends show-off just for your amusement at the pumping best party of the year. Barbu is innovative, artistic, an exhilarating evening out. But most of all, it's just good old-fashioned fun.

Patrick Smith



■ Barbu by Cirque Alfonse

Picture: DAVID JENSEN