

ETCETERA

REVIEW

Branagh is assured but lacks true desperation

THE ENTERTAINER
Garrick Theatre

★★★★☆

Brexit-ish rants, generational divide, tax dodging and Middle East chaos: the contemporary resonance of John Osborne's 1957 state-of-the-nation play is almost eerie. Paired with an effective metaphor – the dying days of music hall – it's a strong closing piece for the Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's Garrick residency.

The other lure for Branagh is the chance to further emulate Sir Laurence Olivier, who originated the central role of failed vaudevillian Archie Rice. Branagh gives an assured song and dance performance, if overly slick. He misses the desperate sheen of one for whom the spotlight is a harrowing addiction, even though he knows his talent isn't equal to it. Nor is he entirely convincing as the womanising bastard who's "dead behind the eyes".

Rob Ashford's production is similarly well presented, with an elegant fading grandeur set from Christopher Oram, but to mixed effect. He elides the distinction between reality and artifice by merging stage and home, creating a fluid, dreamlike evening but muddling Osborne's central point



■ Kenneth Branagh stars in *The Entertainer* Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

about the dangers of clinging to a world that no longer exists. Ashford's version of music hall is also rather too glamorous.

The gin-soaked domestic battles – with Archie's family acting as a microcosm of post-Suez, identity crisis Britain – are stronger, with Greta Scacchi superb as a blowsy, long-suffering wife, Gawn Grainger a belligerent Edwardian raging against progress, and Jonah Hauer-King effective as a conscientious objector whose generation is

made to fight wars waged by their delusional elders. Sophie McShera's left-leaning daughter is passionate but too shrill.

The most arresting moment is the quietest: the evening begins with Branagh's Archie alone on stage, his crisp taps softly echoed by ghostly dancers in the shadows. The production never quite regains that emotional power – it's ultimately entertaining rather than devastating.

Marianka Swain

REVIEW

Reminsicent of Wilde and Wodehouse

THE ROUNDABOUT
Park Theatre

★★★★☆

There was a real buzz at the Park before the start of *The Roundabout*. You are always guaranteed a good night's theatre with a Priestley and the anticipation of its revival (and its first production in London) was palpable darling, palpable. Priestley described his 1931 work as "a little less intellectually negligible than most very light comedies". He should know. He was right.

The day's action is set in a down at heel country house, owned by the nice-old-cove-but-not-very-good-businessman-or-husband Lord Kettlewell. All sorts of Thirties types appear and make us chortle – Chuffy (clubbable, effete and knowing), Parsons the butler, Alice the downtrodden maid (a slave hugging her fetters, according to Staggles), Greenside the artist.



■ Brian Protheroe and Carol Starks Picture: ROBERT WORKMAN

Into this happy band burst Comrades Pamela and Staggles and the fun begins.

Pamela, dressed as a shabby rambler with beret, long-shorts and big boots, is Kettlewell's estranged daughter. She was Up at Oxford but has just returned with Staggles (beautifully observed by the priapic Steven Blakeley) from three months in the USSR.

Priestley has stolen (today we call it sampling) from other writers – Shaw's Major Barbara is the well for the hectoring, class challenging Pamela; Richenda

Carey's wonderful dowager Lady Knightsbridge could easily slip, under full sail, into almost any of Wilde's works and Wodehouse has lent the whole country house thing with amiable chumps fisticuffing and below stairs to-dos.

The Roundabout doesn't have the dark undercurrents of *An Inspector Calls*; instead it wraps us in a blanket of familiar characters and funny lines.

The cast was magnificent but the abiding memory will be the performance of Bessie Carter (unbelievably, making her professional debut) as Pamela. Her passive-aggressive management of her father's mistress Hilda Lancicourt (beautifully observed by Carol Starks) was terrifying.

Tall, elegant, playful, conniving... all delivered with aplomb and a twinkle that enraptured the audience.

Wonderfully enjoyable theatre. David Winskill

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