

Black spy farce never comes in from the cold

Marianka Swain finds the acting compelling and the story intriguing, but Simon Gray's *Cell Mates* is more theatrical curio than lost masterpiece

CELL MATES
HAMPSTEAD THEATRE
★★★★☆

The premiere of Simon Gray's 1995 play was overshadowed by lead Stephen Fry infamously absconding mid-run. Edward Hall's revival puts the focus back on the work - though this is more theatrical curio than lost masterpiece.

Notorious spy George Blake was sentenced to a record 42 years in prison, but in 1966, Irish petty criminal Sean Bourke helped him escape Wormwood Scrubs using a ladder made from rope and knitting needles. The pair then wound up in Moscow - and in a different kind of incarceration.

It's an extraordinary true story, but Gray's writing is oddly opaque, as if respecting the wishes of two men who were determined to control their narratives; we see them reciting their versions of events into tape recorders.

Did Blake really believe in sacrificing lives for the cause? Does he miss his wife and children? And where does this Dutch-Egyptian man, who assumed English nationality and was then embraced by Russia, really consider home?

Likewise, his relationship with Bourke is tiptoed around. Surely there must have been an intimacy between them, beyond shared imprisonment, to form such co-dependency - but Gray's not telling.

However, Emmet Byrne and Geoffrey Streatfeild are compelling performers: Byrne demonstrating Bourke's garrulous wit and shrewd opportunism, which curdles into vodka-fuelled depression, and Streatfeild sketching the contradictions of Blake: the awkward outsider capable of icy ruthlessness.

Yet the more clearly written supporting characters almost steal the show: Danny Lee Wynter is superb as both a melancholy KGB agent and



Geoffrey Streatfeild in *Cell Mates* at Hampstead Theatre. Pictures: MARC BRENNER

ideological sympathiser, and Cara Horgan as a loyal Russian housekeeper and no-nonsense doctor. The duo deliver the play's best moment of pitch-black farce.

Michael Pavelka's designs are sumptuous, and there's an interesting strand questioning what's real in this world. But the spy never comes in from the cold.



Review

Theatre

DAISY PULLS IT OFF
PARK THEATRE
★★★★☆

It is 1927 and Grangewood School for Girls is having its open day. The headteacher, revelling in the school tradition of "all girls together", announces the fourth form's offering: a play called "Daisy Pulls It Off" ... and it's wizard!

Young Daisy (played with lashings of earnestness and goodness by Anna Shaffer) hopes to leave her state Elementary and join the gals at Grangewood. Her dream comes true when her withered old Ma brings her the letter that will change her (and Grangewood's) future for ever - she has won a scholarship.

On the train to school we meet the super snobby Sybil (the fabulous Shobna Gulati) and her

enforcer chum Monica (playing with hilarious comic effect by the sensational Clare Perkins) who are worried about the downmarket contamination that will befall Grangewood with the arrival of an outsider.

Pauline McLynn plays the faithful and decent Trixie who soon develops, well, a bit of a crush, on Daisy. Grangewood is in financial trouble and the pair vow to find the lost treasure that will save the school and their chums. As the narrative rips along, the dialogue is stuffed with references to the preoccupations and values of the times - Bolsheviks, money, class, the burden of Empire, sneaks, playing the game and Doing the Right Thing.

This sort of affectionate spoof had its origins in Michael Palin's 1970's *Ripping Yarns* and has become a regular genre on radio, stage and screen ever since. But



few examples will have bettered Denise Deegan's Daisy in producing so many brilliant lines and prompting so many guffaws.

In a production that makes a virtue of age-blind casting, an experienced ensemble, some decades past their own schooldays, were clearly having a terrific time: occasionally the script seemed to be abandoned in favour of ad libs and spontaneous laughter. At times it was impossible to hear the dialogue as members of the audience were crying with laughter.

A spiffing evening's entertainment, oozing with oodles of fun. A Christmas cracker.

David Winskill

Review

A Christmas Carol Review

A CHRISTMAS CAROL
THE OLD VIC
★★★★☆

Dickens' timeless morality tale gets the all-star treatment with Matilda director Matt Warchus bringing inventive flourish, Jack Thorne a socially-conscious adaptation, and a scruffily charismatic Rhys Ifans winning pity as miser Scrooge.

Like all good festive entertainment there's tears, laughter and a joyful clap-a-long to arrangements of carols for handbells and voices.

Rob Howell's in the round set evokes a party atmosphere as the cast hand out mince pies and play jigs before patchwork-

clad ghosts efficiently whisk us through Scrooge's night from hell. They show how his debt-ridden childhood has led to a Thatcherite world view and lonely old age, a love of money replacing affection for sweetheart Belle.

As the reborn Scrooge skips around dispensing festivities and enlisting the audience in gathering ingredients for the Cratchit's Christmas dinner, his redemption is moving, funny and life-affirming.

To the strains of Joy to the World, a final fall of fake snow and Silent Night on handbells, this traditional, uplifting, and entertaining blend of knees up merriment creepy ghost story and a pricked conscience is highly recommended.