

Overstuffed but passionate plea for NHS

Marianka Swain finds charm and anger in an uneven polemic by Primrose Hill playwright Alan Bennett on the ailing Health service

ALLELUJAH!

BRIDGE THEATRE

★★★★☆



Picture by Manuel Harlan

Octogenarian national treasure Alan Bennett is reunited with his Primrose Hill neighbour the director Nicholas Hytner, meaning his new play premieres at the Bridge. It's a big get, and there are wonderful moments here, but this lengthy work is also overstuffed and polemical.

It's set in the geriatric ward of a Yorkshire cradle-to-grave hospital, 'The Beth', where a local documentary crew captures its local ethos and newly formed choir as part of efforts to avoid closure. But the arrival of management consultant Colin, advising the Health Minister on efficiency targets, spells trouble – even though Colin's own father, Joe, is a patient.

Samuel Barnett has the thankless job of humanising ambitious Tory free-marketer Colin – when the playwright is firmly on the other side of the argument.



Pictures by Manuel Harlan

Overt NHS debate grows tiresome, but a scene where Joe fails to recognise Colin, then exhibits venomous homophobia, is compelling; more interpersonal moments would help fuse politics and drama.

Tonally, it's also a mix. There are quintessential Bennett one-liners, plus charming song-and-dance fantasy sequences – with beautiful arrangements, choreography and lighting by George Fenton, Arlene Phillips

and Natasha Chivers respectively. But they war with sinister threads: patients abandoned by their families, elder abuse, and a nurse playing Angel of Death to free up beds.

In a massive cast, most characters are thinly defined, but great performances keep us engaged. In particular, Peter Forbes's grandstanding chairman, Deborah Findlay's dour nurse, David Moorst's nasty work experience kid, Sacha

Dhawan's dignified (though – as written – too saintly) immigrant doctor, and, among the patients, Simon Williams, Jeff Rawle, Patricia England, Sue Wallace, Julia Foster and Gwen Taylor.

An uneven work, but at its best thrillingly fiery as Bennett attacks profiteering and strained elder care, and pleads for compassion. Vital lines ring out: "Nobody can ever be written off".

Marianka Swain

Theatre Review: End of The Pier

END OF THE PIER

PARK THEATRE

★★★★☆

Bookended by two terrific stand-up comedy performances, *End of the Pier* is an intelligent and challenging piece of theatre.

Bobby's stellar career of the 1980s crashed after a Guardian journal reported him telling a racist joke at a gig in Macclesfield ("You don't expect a Guardian journalist in Macclesfield").

We are in the dowdy sitting room of his Blackpool home – he is not living the dream.

On the television, son Michael is delivering his observational and topical (Brexit, Trump, World Cup) routine: not a flicker of amusement troubles Bobby's impassive countenance.

Michael arrives and they banter, finish each other's jokes and

argue the toss between traditional and alternative stand up – even referencing the great Stanley Holloway.

"Why," asks Bobby, "Did we get twenty million views each week?" "Because," flashes back Michael, "there was nothing on the other side!"

An interesting enough debate, but *End of the Pier* soon takes us to much darker places, posing deeply uncomfortable questions about comedy, racism, family, personal honesty and integrity. The mood changes when Michael asks his dad (although, like Bart Simpson he rarely uses the word Dad) for advice.

There has been an incident with the potential to ruin his career. Will history repeat itself? They are joined by Michael's girlfriend Jenna, a BBC Comedy Commissioner, she doesn't gel with Bobby. Tala Gouveia delivers a wonderful portrayal of a social media and Prêt obsessed, uber focussed

technocrat.

I am determined not to reveal too much of this wonderfully entertaining, beautifully constructed plot. It sparkles with invention, unexpected twists and clever-clever dialogue. Enough to say is that Michael's "incident" involves his hitting someone, abusing them and being threatened with a Twitter exposure.

The victim of the assault is played by the extraordinarily talented Nitin Ganatra. He has a difficult role, like a striptease, he gradually exposes more while teasing and mocking the audiences' preconceptions. The chemistry enjoyed by Les Dennis and Blake Harrison is phenomenal; easy, perfectly paced and entirely believable. Robins' sharp and mesmerising play demands attention. The authentic and powerful performances will ensure that it gets it.

David Winskill



Les Dennis as washed up comedian Bobby in *End of the Pier*.

Picture: SIMON ANNAND