

ETCETERA

Chess the play is a stalemate of confusion and disconnect

RAVENS: SPASSKY vs FISCHER

HAMPSTEAD THEATRE

★★★★☆

We've had Chess the musical; now, here's Chess the play. At the 1972 World Chess Championship in Reykjavik, American challenger Bobby Fischer faces the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky - as their countries fight a Cold War proxy battle.

Both teams soon spiral into paranoia, while the tournament organisers wonder whether catering to the diva-like American is worth the trade-off of a TV broadcast and renewed interest in the game.

Playwright Tom Morton-Smith has clearly done his research, and there are timely ideas here: governments' use of soft power, cheating or tampering, a charismatic individual disrupting the system, and an attack on

MARIANKA SWAIN

features@hamhigh.co.uk

objective truth. However, at an unwieldy near-three hours, this feels like material in search of a play.

The title is misleading, since we spend far more time with the flamboyantly obnoxious Fischer. Robert Emms gives a committed performance as he unravels, spewing antisemitic conspiracy theories (while denying his own Jewish heritage) and descending into a childlike state.

However, a little of Fischer goes a long way, and the same points are repeated: he needs to destroy his opponents, he has a confused hatred of communism linked to his mother, and he dislikes America. It's Fischer versus the world.

Spassky (beautifully played by Ronan Raftery) also dislikes the nation he purportedly represents, but his position is more



Ronan Raftery and Robert Emms as Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer pictures: MANUEL HARLAN

interesting: being chess champion affords him the luxury of being an apolitical Soviet.

There's good support from Rebecca Scroggs as a wry Soviet minder, and Gary Shelford's Icelandic policeman.

However, the chess matches are confusing and antidramatic. It's unclear how the tournament and scoring works, or how their playing styles compare.

Annabella Comyn's production is most engaging when the tale descends into farce - Jamie Vartan's set collapsing in on itself as the tournament organisers are forced to search light fixtures for sabotage devices.

But overall, there are too many clunky chess metaphors, rather than allowing us to connect to the characters and reach our own conclusions.



Theatre Review

GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE BEARS

JACKSONS LANE HIGHGATE

★★★★☆

There's more than a bowl of porridge at stake in this new environmentally conscious version of Goldilocks and the Three Bears by Hiccup and Derby Theatre - even if the porridge is probably gluten-free.

In this world, the bears live in a recycled haven of wondrous gadgets and inventions and Goldilocks is a thrill-seeking tomboy who breaks into their home after smashing a window with a ball.

The tale opens with a witty song to celebrate the enduring power of the value of three in storytelling. The cast of three [of course] play their guitars and ukuleles [also appropriate - wait for it] as they set up the story that takes place in a 'deep forest made of teapots and... ukuleles.'

The set design is a major feature of this warm-hearted, witty production. Fashioned to resemble a cross-



section of a fantasy Wendy house kitted out by a nutty professor, the bears have found every conceivable use for innumerable found objects

inspired by the old adage 'one man's rubbish is another man's gold'. Bicycle wheels power a shower made out of a bucket, metal bins are

used as chairs and suitcases are beds that look invitingly cosy, despite the blankets being made out of crisp packets.

Hiccup Theatre's Goldilocks and the Three Bears runs at Jacksons Lane until December 24

Most charming of all is the tea dispenser with three teapots in decreasing sizes lined up on a plank of wood attached to a lever. Goldilocks has no respect for the homely order of the bears' world. The irony of her dismissive lyrics in her big number, 'I want something electronic, supersonic, so long as it's not made of wood,' may not, hopefully, resonate yet with the young target audience but it certainly struck a chord with parents. As you'd expect in a Christmas show there is plenty of physical comedy with lots of he's [Baby Bear] or she's [naughty Goldilocks] behind you action that had the little ones wriggling and giggling. While there wasn't a snowflake or bauble in sight, the touching end-note of forgiveness brings home a worthy Christmas message.

Caroline David