

ETCETERA

More time and dialogue, and cast could have delivered belter

Polite Conversation, written by Andrew Crook. (Sold out)

The Tea Lawn, Lauderdale House
★★★★☆

Despite the grey clouds and threat of rain, open air theatre is getting to be quite fun.

More informal than theatres with roofs, we sit in our allocated squares like pawns on a green-brown chess board, while everyone mucks in with picnics and shared corkscrews.

On stage, glamorous Gwen and nice-but-dim Fielding have arrived for a BBQ: "Lockdown is over. It's Super-Saturday and we are to mix and enjoy ourselves!"

It's hosted by friends Emma and Thomas but they are early, so grab some wine and head off for a saunter round the large garden.

Emma appears, fussing over the preparations and who's intolerant of what. She's joined by Thomas:

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man bun, large scarf, combat trousers and boots – looking like an art lecturer trying too hard to be cool. There's a bit of an atmosphere between them – Emma has been told that he has "...been visiting sordid little websites" on her computer. She is livid.

Gwen and Fielding return and are open mouthed as Thomas announces he is gay. "You bastard – you could have come out as bi!" yells Emma.

The conversation quickly gets to the nitty-gritty of his moving out and who gets Lytton (the Labrador, not the biographer) and the Red Rosewood Ottoman.

And that's it really. A few COVID gags and some other revelations (including one involving said Ottoman) follow but seem to go nowhere and are certainly not



Polite Conversation is an outdoor play performed on the Tea Lawn at Lauderdale House, Highgate.

Pictures: WILLIAM UNDERWOOD

over-milked for their comic potential. There is some very funny dialogue, a misunderstanding involving Gwen's breasts, some pizza dough and Fielding, a few references to the Heath and... not much else.

Playwright Andrew Crook (perhaps ambitiously borrowing the title of Jonathan Swift's dialogues) has drawn some vivid north London types but serially

missed opportunities to explore and develop them - perhaps inevitable for a project that was hatched and despatched at great speed.

Scheduled to last an hour, it was, all of a sudden, over in 45 minutes.

The cast were excellent and, if given more time and more dialogue, would be more than capable of delivering a real belter of an evening.



Review, by Marianka Swain

Sleepless in Seattle: A Musical Romance
Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre.

To September 27.
★★★★☆

This musical version of movie Sleepless in Seattle, postponed from its March opening, is now a pilot for fully staged, socially distanced indoor theatre.

Good-humoured ushers make the safety measures, like masks and temperature checks, feel natural, and there's plenty of room for staggered seating in this cavernous venue.

The show itself sticks closely to the film. Grief-stricken widower Sam suffers from insomnia, so 10-year-old son Jonah tricks him into speaking to a radio psychiatrist.

Listeners are moved by his raw emotion – including Baltimore-based Annie, who believes this is destiny.

Sadly, the 'com' of Nora Ephron's rom-com suffers in the sparsely populated venue (400 down from 1,300). Michael



Kimberley Walsh, Jack Reynolds and Jay McGuiness in Sleepless, A Romantic Musical.

Picture: ALISTAIR MUIR

Burdette's book fares best riffing on the Nineties setting – like Annie's bewilderment at a new-fangled computer that allows her to work from home. Pop-star

pair Jay McGuiness (The Wanted) and Kimberley Walsh (Girls Aloud) are likeable leads. But they lack the Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan quirky charisma that

made the journey as fun as the inevitable destination.

And Morgan Young's static production doesn't utilise their Strictly Come Dancing

moves. Similarly, Robert Scott and Brendan Cull's jazz score is genial but too sentimental.

The standout number is witty "Dear Sleepless", featuring Charlie Bull, Leanne Garretty and Dominique Planter's eager letter-writers.

Excellent, too, are Harriet Thorpe, Tania Mathurin, Jobe Hart and Cory English.

Morgan Large and Ian William Galloway's creative design whisks us between locations, with architectural drawings nodding to Sam's profession, while a 12-piece orchestra provides sterling support.

Just as the story is in meta conversation with the classic movie An Affair to Remember, Sleepless benefits from double nostalgia: our affection for the original film, and the joy of attending theatre – just like the good old days.

Add in some poignant resonance with characters physically separated or suffering bereavement, and this feel-good show becomes a post-lockdown tonic.