

What's On

No rot in this cast!

Head Rot Holiday @ The Crescent

WEI JUN CHUNG

HAVING not heard of this play or writer, Sarah Daniels, I stole a quick glance at the audience upon entering the intimate studio room of the Crescent Theatre, hoping it would give me an indication of what I would be in store for. Before I had the chance to make a full assessment, the play started by bringing us to Penwell Special Hospital, an institute for violent and mentally disorientated patients.

It could have been easy to write a heavy, serious story of insanity, isolation and physical and emotional pain, with a topic like this. It could have been just as easy for Daniels to have gone for a *Bad Girls* approach and present a scandalous institute of underdeveloped criminal characters, drug-taking and sex. Instead, the most striking thing about *Head-Rot Holiday* was the humour.

The two-hour play introduced us to three inmates and unlikely friends, (Dee, Claudia and Ruth) and three nurses. Insights into the running of the hospital were broken up by emotional character revelations, touching soliloquies and shocking events that kept me holding my breath.

With three main patients and three main nurses, it wasn't long before I began to draw parallels between the two groups.

The "us versus them" idea. Despite the differences between Dee, Claudia and Ruth, there is a sense of solidarity shown most touchingly when the three girls are seen getting ready for the Christmas disco. The "ritual", as Ruth called it, could be recognised by any of the girls sitting in the audience with Dee's first steps in high heel shoes reminiscent of Bambi. But their excitement just emphasised the banality of day-in-day-out imprisonment that they couldn't escape.

The three nurses fitted the three stereotypes of prison authorities. The newbie, the one who's been there too long with un-PC favouritism, and the one with the conscience. By the end of the play, you are left wondering who is really mad, who's got problems – the "crazy" patients or the nurses?

I thoroughly enjoyed *Head-Rot Holiday*. It gave me an insight into what goes on in these institutions and I found it as shocking as it was endearing. The intimate venue was perfect for the play because it imitated the confinement of the institution and the feeling of constant isolation of the patients and staff. Performed by drama students from the Birmingham School of Acting, I felt more connected to them as they were all around my age. Though I'm not sure if that is a good thing or not!

Previews

Students A play by Jack Levy and Ben Gardener

This student-written play is a light-hearted comedy about student life. Set in the living room of a typically chaotic student house, the story follows Mike, a nervous media-studies student, as he tries to complete his dissertation, which in turn is a film about student life. He is also trying to make inroads towards his love interest Katie, but his eccentric housemates: Baz, a selfish sports enthusiast, Rachael, a Green Peace protester and Ed, a dressing-gown clad loafer, all seem set on ruining his hopes of love and his dissertation.

Students has a brilliant cast and crew who will certainly make this tale of love, loss and attempted suicide completely hilarious! In fact whilst flying in character for the show last week, the cast got kicked off campus when a security guard actually thought that they were real protesters and it was all

being filmed! Upon explanation that the camera had no film in it and Rachael wasn't a real protestor, but was in fact a fictional character and that none of it was real, the security guard still frog-marched the whole cast off the university. Despite being given a flier, the lovely and slightly confused, security guard still declined the invitation to attend the show, not realising what he will be missing out on!

So, can Mike overcome all the problems university, love, life and his housemates have to throw at him? Come and find out!

Students is being performed at the Mac Theatre on the 11th and 12th December at 7.45 pm. For numbers ring the box office on 0121 440 3838, or book online at www.macarts.co.uk

Infinity Stage Company presents *Absent Friends* by Alan Ayckbourn.

Set in the lounge of an emotionally delicate couple, the play follows the build up and consequences of a 'riotous tea party'.

With evil glares, superficial pleasantries, misplaced dairy products, and a disturbing obsession with paper towels, the play delivers what is clearly recognisable to any victim of an awkward and artificial social situation!

All profit from this production is going to KISS, a children's charity supporting needy children in Uganda – a worthy cause and an awesome performance, undoubtedly value for money!

Absent Friends 11th/12th/13th December at TCs (Coronation Rd) Tickets OTD - £5/7

Feng Shui and an Orange

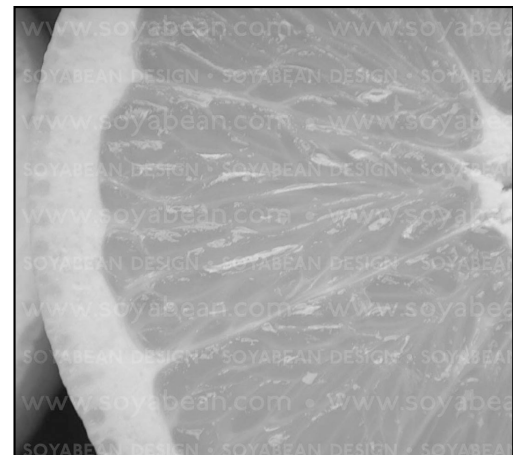
Tangle @ The REP

MADLINE WOOLGAR

SOMETIMES, I make myself angry, because it's a good excuse to break things.

When I said I'd review *Tangle*, I can't say either of my section editors [Oii] or I had any idea what it was about. I decided to risk it, hoping I'd emerge cultural enough to have gained something from the experience. However, when I asked Phil, my unsuspecting friend who had been persuaded to join me to see "not sure, something about a detective" whether he had enjoyed it, he answered truthfully, "I don't know." This seemed to sum up the evening, I had enjoyed it, and I still have no idea why.

As the audience entered, the four actors were occupied taking it in turns to re-arrange the four chairs, two wheelie-chairs, four small stools, three large and an orange. (This orange haunted me throughout the production because, as a true theatre arts student, I tried to decipher some hidden meaning.) There must be a connection between the two. (I found none.) It was clear from the outset that Unlimited Theatre were gal-



loping full pelt into a sphere of appearance versus reality, science and surrealism (thus the orange). Nevertheless, where others have emerged pretentious (yawn), Unlimited Theatre somehow surface clever and astutely observant. Ladies and gentleman, I have seen infinity: it's not that big.

To reduce *Tangle* to a story, four stories even, tangled up, would be an injustice to this brilliant piece of theatre. The actors play out a series of over-lapping scenes as their lives entangle, managing to both develop and remain anonymous in order to represent their part in something bigger. Sometimes when you're talking, I sing in my head. Among all this were moments where the characters appeared to drop their contrived identity and profess some truth about themselves. My secret identity is

just me with a hat on.

I'm not sure what Unlimited Theatre's message was. If it was this idea itself that they were trying to challenge, that we have an expectation that we will be shown something, they shattered it. I wanted to feel frustrated at the inconclusive ending as the glimpse into each of their lives had not been sufficient. We had not been witnessing their lives, it seemed, but an expression of one, as if to suggest the idea that we are all a part of each other, whether we find each other or not. Ultimately the, repeatedly asked questions and the professed quest for truth in the end seemingly comes to nothing, as they like the audience, admit they don't know.

I always sleep with one eye open. It play havoc with my lenses.



Kisses All Round For Kate's Cast

Kiss Me Kate @ The Deb Hall

JESSICA HENNIS

THE student cast of *Kiss Me, Kate* produced an exceptional performance of true class this week at the Guild. The standard of acting, dancing and singing was extraordinarily high resulting in a musical extravaganza complete with standing ovation.

The musical *Kiss Me, Kate* is complete with love stories, comedy and occasional empathy for the characters on stage, and the Birmingham students, without a shadow of a doubt, managed to outdo themselves in expressing these emotions.

The play *Kiss Me, Kate* is set in Baltimore in 1948 and is a play within a play, following the stories of two very different relationships. As it is a play within a play, it is also shows the cast attempting to put together a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* in time for opening night (ironically, the musical is also an adaptation of the Shakespeare play as well). Subsequently, the scenes

alternate between themselves being part of a play and the actor of these play in-between rehearsals. The only criticism I would make as an audience member is that the show lasted almost three hours - mostly due to the length of the solo songs. Each one included a solo encore to an already lengthy song which on occasion seemed unnecessary and slightly took the edge off some performances.

The cast consisted of 25 students, each one of whom showed his/her impressive talents in all areas of dance, song and acting. Having said that, there were certain people who managed to stand out despite the general impressive ability of every single person on the stage. Ben Lewis, Stacia McKee and Natalie Lipin in particular shone out for their incredible talent, way beyond amateur student ability. The three of them have had notable experience in theatre prior to this show including stage school for Natalie and a degree in musical theatre for Stacia. Despite this experience, it

does not in any way diminish the impact that their individual performances had on any member of the audience. The singing abilities of both girls was of such high standard that I almost forgot that it was the university's guild that I was sitting in and not a London theatre.

Another outstanding aspect was the dancing and choreography accompanying the majority of the songs. The dancers showed true professionalism in their energy, focus and discipline and they brought the stage to life because of it. The dancing was intricate and therefore riveting to the eye; it obviously took huge commitment and determination to reach a standard that high especially considering the duration of the solo songs.

All in all, the production of *Kiss Me, Kate* was utterly outstanding in both collective and individual performances. Although it is no longer showing at the Guild, anyone who was lucky enough to see it will join with me in applauding their huge talent and success.