



Tired: Jim Sweeney, Paul Clayton, Nicola Stapleton, Gaye Brown

More of a who cares than a whodunnit



by Nicholas de Jongh

Scissor Happy X
The Duchess

IF YOU expect to find a night at the theatre an utter bore then you will not be disappointed by this comedy-thriller. For Scissor Happy in its own modest way offers the chance of a fabulously boring night out. Even the authors seem aware of how few thrills or laughs Scissor Happy offers, because substantial playing-time is devoted to a Butlin's holiday-camp style of audience participation, inviting us to check alibis, question suspects and even vote on the murderer's identity. Happily this proved a first night when the audience was more amusing than the play.

Scissor Happy boasts a full six authors — which only goes to show that in playwriting many hands make light rubbish. It began as a murder mystery named Scherenschitt, by the German Paul Portner, and dealt with an old female pianist stabbed to death in a flat above a hairdressing salon. Then in 1978 Marilyn Abrams and Bruce Jordan, presumably attracted by the German title's last syllable, bought the rights and dumped the play in Lake George, New York — in a theatre that is, soon titles all over America and the world beyond went quite mad and presented the play.

Neil Mullarkey, Lee Simpson and Jim Sweeney, who are responsible for this new adaptation, are members of the Comedy Store. But there's nothing fresh or novel about their humorous touches. "It's very middle of the road, isn't it," my companion whispered. Middle of the Road? Scissor Happy hardly steps off the kerb.

The first, tired sequence of jokes, for example, depends upon the fact that Paul Clayton's hair-stylist, Tony Whitcomb (get it?) is a blonde queen in leather trousers who cannot conceal his delight at getting his hands and snippers on a mysterious new young client — Doug Bradshaw, boutique entrepreneur pile

up like cars in a motorway crash while Tony delivers intonduces that might go down gayly at the Black Cap. I rather liked a reference to the retired old piano-player upstairs and a sad case of "pianist envy".

Gaye Brown works fetchingly as an upper-crust salon client, whose husband is something big and nasty in Yorkshire water. When arraigned as a murder-suspect by Lee Simpson's nicely phlegmatic policemen in charge of the murder enquiry, she blusters in true Ortonesque style: "I'm a respected member of society. I've worked with orphans." But the quips generally come thick and fast. There are no thrills or chills at all. Neil Mullarkey's production goes with a swing, but a swing is not enough.

THE MURDERER could be an antiques dealer whom Jim Sweeney plays with delight.

But comic brio as a maestro of twitchy sarcasm, treating the audience to looks of contemptuous derision, it might be Nicola Stapleton, playing the assistant stylist, Barbara. But who cares. Members of the audience, quickly worming out all the suspects' lies, voted mostly for Barbara as murderess. This verdict allowed for one of the alternative endings. But it mattered not a jot.

This comedy thriller was "creatively developed" by Nica Burns, who chooses the plays for Stoll Moss's 10 West End theatres.

Perhaps she would explain why the award-winning BSC production of Peter Whelan's fascinating play *The Herbal Bed* had to vacate the Duchess to make way for this pile.

Reviews: — *adequate*
* *good*,
** *very good*,
*** *outstanding*,
excellent

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