


FIRST NIGHT
by **Nicholas de Jongh**
Stoppard and Shaffer Double-bill
The Comedy

Farcical fun in the dark and a lethal spoof



Comedy trio Double-bill stars Sara Crowe, Anna Chancellor and Nicholas McAuliffe last night

Picture: David Barrett

THE farcical double-bill from the 1960s shows what absurd fun Tom Stoppard and Peter Shaffer could do when they let their fantasies run wild — though with one playing not much more than walk-on roles. Neither play is first-rate farce and the Stoppard, although as inventive and ingenious as you'd expect, comes across as too flimsily whimsical. But Shaffer's *Black Comedy* springs a volley of dastardly jokes about furtive behaviour in the dark — when horrors are made and reputations lost.

The darkness in *Black Comedy* is of the most unusual kind: The stage shines with light when the actors playing upon it are supposed to be in the dark. All illumination is switched off when the performers are supposed to be in the light. The first minutes are played in the pitch-black obscurity of the Kensington studios of the two-acting, unscrupulous escalator Brinsford Miller. Then a fuse goes and the stage is flooded with light — to reveal the audience hovering on the verge of several disasters and very ripe farce.

Those disasters, which involve medicine, insurance and the chaotic intricacies of a case against a freestanding brick-a-brack you have borrowed from Harold, your camp antique dealer neighbour, when he unexpectedly arrives home? Worse, how do you deal with your 'singing' delinquent girl friend (Anna Chancellor) and her silent accomplice, Sara Crowe's vindictive Clea, who has reappeared, hot for revenge — in bed or out of it.

Not easily of course, and David Dorian's character, even though he does not seem to prosper, is full of farcical ploys, rocks of sweat, buckets of agitation. He creeps about the room, hands installing the action of a tentative crab, to extract Harold's furniture. But of course people, Harold included, happen to be sitting on it. The antique 'tombstone' caught up in telephone wires, furtively dashing to seize a chair when momentarily revealed, raises most of the laughter.

Greg Doran's intensely direction is not, however, particularly well-tuned to the hot-blooded music of farce nor is all the acting. Notwithstanding the fact that the play is a lethal farcical creation, but Desmond Barrist's glowing Harold could do with infusions of predatory glee. The farce is far more comfortable as a first book, the technical theatre critic in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*.

Working a look of airy self-importance to conceal the vacancy of his mind — a shrewd touch this — Brinsford, like his colleague Moon, flails himself swept into the play they are watching and succeed as one of the characters. The play is a gem in a limited space of the dry wit and mordant humour of Agatha Christie's earlier *Old Mousetrap*. But why provide the ungodly 'film' version? You are soon caught in the vice of aimless repetition.

I loved, though Stoppard's portrayal of the director, spectral Brinsford and Moon, the second-tier critic who finds the corpse of his superior on stage — a nice touch that. We theatre reviewers deserve to be stripped of our small pretensions and Sir Tom does a nice line in stripping.

Review by Nicholas de Jongh

*** very good, *** outstanding, & poor

Real Inspector Black Comedy de Jongh Standard



Clipped By:

ianharris

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