

Reza's comedy draws few conclusions

Theatre

Life X3

National Theatre, London

★★★★☆

Yasmina Reza's new play is an elegant enigma with triple variations. Like many dramatists before her, including Priestley, Ayckbourn and Frayn, Reza is fascinated by alternative possibilities; and behind the outward form of a 90-minute bourgeois comedy lies the suggestion that everyday life, like the universe itself, is made up of dark, invisible matter.

To prove her point Reza offers us three perspectives on a single situation. The core consists of a married couple, Henry and Sonia, discovering important dinner guests, Hubert and Ines, arriving on the wrong night. To make matters worse, Henry's professional world is suddenly thrown into disarray: he learns from Hubert that a similar scientific paper to one he has long been writing — on the flatness of galaxy halos — is about to be published. The play's subtlety depends on the way all four characters react to social and scientific upheaval.

If I call the play enigmatic, it is because Reza does not draw any lofty conclusions; but, in moving from wild farce to rueful comedy, she implies that any crisis contains within it unknowable alternates. On the most basic level, we see Henry reacting to news of a rival paper first with neurotic frenzy and eventually with stoic calm. Sonia may either find Hubert, on whom Henry's promotion depends, arrogantly perverse or adulterously attractive. Most intriguing of all, Henry and Sonia's off-stage six-year-old may either be brattishly demanding or pioneeringly playful.

As an intellectual construct, the play is fascinating: the one flaw theatrically is that the temperature perceptibly drops after the riotous first scene. Nothing is funnier on stage than to see supposedly decorous people behaving badly; and Reza, in Christopher Hampton's superb translation, gives us a dinner-party from hell. The hosts insult the guests, the guests insult each other and every attempt at conversation is punctuated by the clamorous cries of the unseen child. If farce can be defined as the worst day of your life, then this is a mini-classic of the genre.

The subsequent scenes refine Reza's argument. In particular, she shows that people who engage in cosmic research may be fuelled by petty rivalries and squalid desires. Even more intriguingly, the one character who has no professional aspirations, Ines, is the one who most movingly expresses a belief in the significance of human life. But, however much one responds to Reza's own faith in our hidden potential, the fact is the play's emotional excitement gradually decreases.

That does not, however, inhibit the stylishness of Matthew Warchus's production or Mark Thompson's airy, circular design. The actors also

precisely register their shifts in behaviour while suggesting they possess an irreducible personal core. Mark Rylance catches exactly Henry's temperate volatility, as does Harriet Walter Sonia's inquisitive intelligence. And, as the starving guests, Oliver Cotton perfectly conveys Hubert's comic arrogance and Imelda Staunton his wife's resistance to a lifetime's condescension. Reza's play is an entertaining conundrum but one that suggests that those who spend their life looking at the stars may also have their heads in the gutter.

Michael Billington

Until January 16. Box office: 020-7452 3000

Pop

Finley Quaye

Shepherds Bush Empire, London

★★★★☆

The career — if that's what it is — of Finley Quaye has appeared so chaotic that it's a miracle he ever managed to record one album, let alone add a follow-up in the shape of the recent Vanguard. Ramshackle timekeeping and bizarre behaviour in public (some of which prompted Goldie to describe Quaye as "an embarrassment to music" in the Sun) have suggested that the 26-year-old could be pop's most promising candidate for imminent self-destruction.

But for the time being, here he is, prowling the stage in front of his sprawling nine-piece band and seeming about as focused as anybody could wish... even if he does bear a passing resemblance to Scouse comic Craig Charles.

What is striking about Quaye's live performance is its lack of samples, loops and other electronic paraphernalia. It's like spinning back to a time when musicians played all their instruments by hand, in this case an impressive spread of drums and percussion, keyboards and a couple of real live horn players. Over this lot, Quaye drapes his allusive, free-association lyrics, which don't stand up to too much scrutiny but do generate a general sense of mystical whimsy and quasi-Rastafarian spirituality.

In fact, for a man associated with some kind of cutting edge, Quaye is remarkably old-fashioned, delving into classic ska and reggae beats like a born-again UB40. The brisk pulse of Feeling Blue, for instance, compels you to think of rude boys in pork-pie hats, while the fog of reverb that hovers over chunks of the set as the band skank away industriously suggests that although Quaye was born in Edinburgh, his head is in Jamaica.

Quaye can become bland and colourless with terrifying speed when he lets the music drift aimlessly around him, although he was able to sustain the hushed, confessional tone of Hey Now despite its minimal instrumentation and slow tempo. Luckily, he ups



Looking at the stars, I

the dragging tempo with turbo-powered pieces, a scowling, guitar-driven version of Jimi Hendrix's Voodoo Chile (though stops a few yards short of a psychedelic meltdown) and a raunchy-up treatment of Shining. For an encore, a Man's World, all beats and moody Quaye produced a real impersonation of a tor soulman. But has t Finley Quaye stood up Adam Sweeting
Finley Quaye and Priti
Scream play The Point
Dublin (003-531836 67
December 23. A webca
this performance is on
Virgin.net today.

World

Eliades Ochoa and Cuarteto Patria

Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★☆

Black hat, black shirt, black trousers — Eliades comes on like an over-cowboy, a guitar slung over his neck. He is surrounded by a five-piece band, all standard uniform (shirts, black trousers), double-bass player and guitarist flanked by the cussionists, banging away anything from cowbells to gas and maracas. The over-sized "quartet" k