



Voyage through the Underworld: in his new work, *Acheron*, Howson again uses crowds rather than individuals to express his own grim outlook

A comic-strip Hell

EXHIBITION

Peter Howson
Flowers East, E2
Nick Hackworth

MANY of the most successful modern British figurative painters take a dark view of the world. Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville, for example, make violent equations between the materiality of paint and flesh in their investigations of the human body. Scottish painter Peter Howson is similarly attracted

to the dark but his style of expression is different, being graphic, bordering on the style of comic-strip art. For Howson, Hell is more visible in crowd scenes than in studies of individuals.

The highlights of this latest show are two large, bold canvases in which misshapen, grasping human forms fight for attention. In *Acheron*, an overloaded boat attempts to cross one of the rivers of the Underworld while lost souls reach out from the water for salvation. In *Legion*, a contorted, possessed

man is held down, surrounded by a crowd, some watching, while others, including a Christ-like figure, are praying. On the right, in the foreground, the glow of the fires of Hell rises up from a drain.

The major question about Howson's work is whether his distinctive style is effective in conveying these grand themes. In a curious way, however, the artist has little choice. To paint in a more realistic manner would be seen as a poor attempt to emulate the old masters. Such explicitly religious sub-

ject matter sticks out like a sore thumb in the art world and accounts for the lack of official attention afforded him.

Despite significant commercial success, which has earned him the honour of being a target for forgers who recently tried to offload some fakes at auction, Howson is largely ignored by the Establishment. The continuing strength of his work marks such an attitude as unwarranted prejudice.

● *Until 15 January.*
Information: 020 7920 7777.

WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

POP

Alex Parks
Scala, NI
Andre Paine

CORNISH teenager Alex Parks was a revelation on BBC1's *Fame Academy*. She had a powerful voice and an unstudied charm, and was also admirably open about being a lesbian.

The majority of her fans at the Scala were also young gay women, and she was thankful for their support. She certainly needs them: it is two years since Parks (now 21) won the talent show and the viewers have, it seems, largely moved on.

However, it is their loss, because the diminutive singer with the strong yet doleful voice still has much to offer.

She appeared nervous on stage, fiddling with her earpiece and shutting her eyes while singing.

But there is clearly a bloody-mindedness to Parks because she refused to perform any of her *Fame Academy* covers, such as Christina Aguilera's *Beautiful*. That was artistically creditable, but it meant she only sang 10 songs.

Despite this brevity, Parks's soulful performance was impressive on songs ranging from ballads to the angsty rock of *Wandering Soul*.

There was even a brief attempt at line-dancing during the upbeat new single, *Honesty*.

Unfortunately, Parks was no great mover. But her voice is still the best thing to come out of reality TV.

THEATRE

Almost Blue
Riverside Studios
Fiona Mountford

INITIALLY, it seems as though this piece, winner of a prestigious annual award for experimental theatre, will be long on impressive incidentals and short on anything resembling a sustaining narrative.

There is sophisticated use of banks of sound technology, and sultry lighting plays over artfully positioned gauze screens. But do we actually care what is going on?

Not when the characters writhe around off-puttingly in the middle of sentences to emphasise the anguish they are feeling, certainly.

But slowly, as a murder investigation turns into a hunt for a serial killer with a skin fetish, the travails of grumpy detective Grace become more gripping.

In Christopher Dunkley's taut adaptation of Carlo Lucarelli's novel, Grace's sole hope is Simon, blind and agoraphobic, whose synaesthesia leads him to experience different sounds as colours. Holed up with his radios, audio-scanners and general computer wizardry, he identifies the distinctive "green" voice of the wanted man.

A superlative turn from Declan Harvey as Simon, so confident in his bedroom with his sense of sound, and so vulnerable in the world outside because of his lack of sight, anchors Lu Kemp's production and allows the atmosphere of menace to be cranked up nicely.

A climactic shower scene, even though it takes place offstage, has us thinking *Psycho* thoughts long before anything happens. Almost a success.

● *Until 11 December.*
Box office: 020 8237 1111.

ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT

Ten pages of the best listings in London start on page 44

CDS OF THE WEEK

ROCK
The Darkness
One Way Ticket to Hell and Back (Atlantic)
★★★★☆

THE second Darkness album had a rather difficult birth after songs were scrapped and bassist Frankie Poullain was sacked. In the end they've produced just 35 minutes of music. They still can't decide whether they are the novelty band that the album's title and a track called *Knockers* promise, or the straight-faced, Queen-worshipping, spirit of rock 'n' roll that the terrific English Country Garden and Justin Hawkins's candelabra-rattling vocals suggest.

Although Hawkins is no Freddie Mercury — and *Is It Just Me?* and *Girlfriend* plod rather than roar — the string-laden *Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* is the epic they've long-promised. *Blind Man* — for the first time in their career — suggests some attempt at longevity and genuine songsmithery.



John Aizlewood

Gogol Bordello
Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike (SideOne Dummy, SD1271)
★★★★☆

WITH scratchy fiddle, blood-curdling screams, four-letter words laced with Russian slang and punkish beats, the second track of this disc, *I Would Never Wanna Be Young Again*, will either repel you or have you beating at the ICA door come their live gig on 3 December.

Led by the extravagantly mustachioed Ukrainian-born Eugene Hutz, Gogol Bordello's wild club nights at Manhattan's Mehanata club have become legendary. The music is a ferocious fusion of Gypsy, Russian, Latin and other immigrant styles with punk and techno. Although this sounds completely different, it has the playfulness and protest of *Manu Chao*. Indeed, *Chao* has performed with Hutz at the club. The most anarchic CD of the year.



Simon Broughton

CLASSICAL
Brahms
Cello Sonatas
Steven Isserlis/
Stephen Hough
(Hyperion CDA, 67529)
★★★★☆

IN his liner notes, the cellist Steven Isserlis draws an interesting distinction between the two works: the E minor, he says, invokes classical and earlier styles the better to stake Brahms's claim as a composer of historical significance, while the F major is written by an older man "with all the passion and sweep of youth".

The latter qualities are heard in abundance in an evocative performance by Isserlis and his partner Stephen Hough, which marries effusive warmth and inward eloquence, just as their E minor succeeds in combining Romantic expression and Classical discipline. The disc also contains *Waldesruhe* and G minor *Rondo* by Dvorak, and a couple of pieces by that composer's pupil and son-in-law, Jozef Suk.

Barry Millington

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