

## The Arts

# Vision that never fades

## THEATRE

### Woza Albert!

Riverside Studios

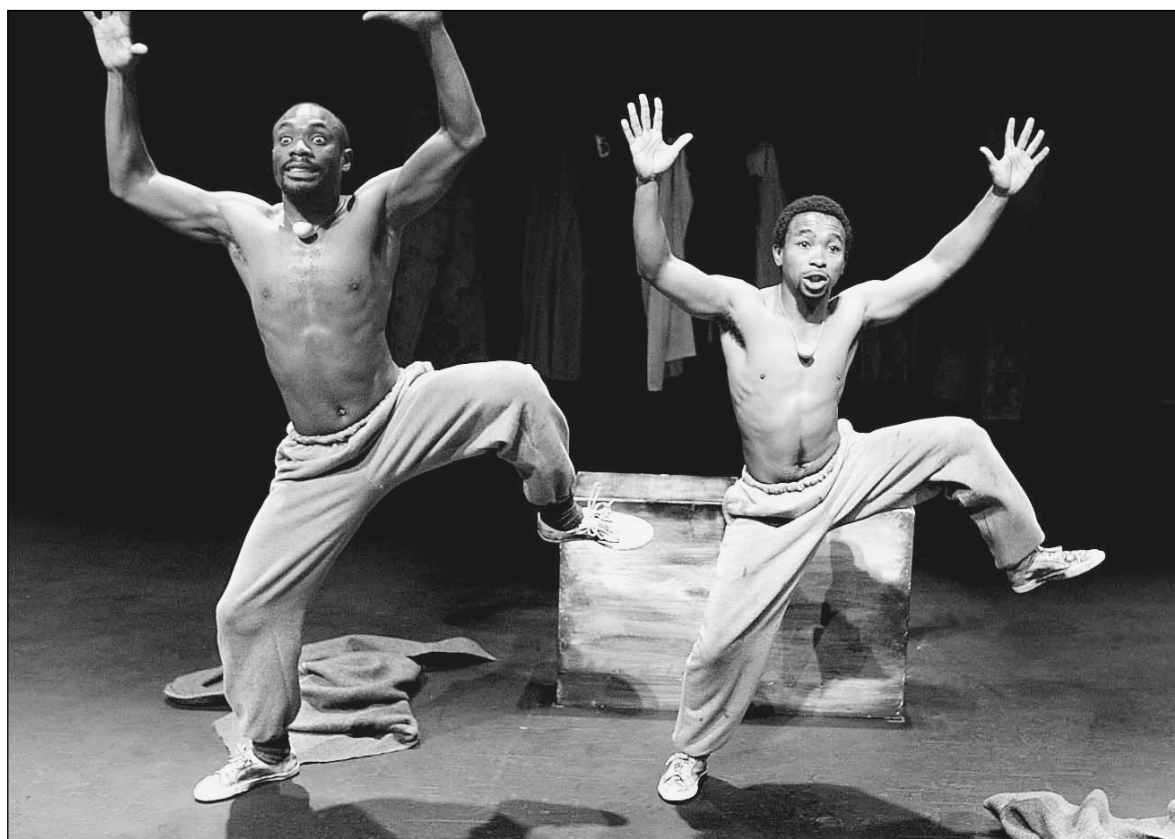
### Nicholas de Jongh

NOW that the inhumanities of apartheid and a corrupt white minority regime have been well banished from South Africa, much of Woza Albert's political urgency and dramatic power has been diffused. But when it was premiered 20 years ago in America and Britain, the play's bitter-sweet dream of what would happen to Jesus Christ if he rose again and found himself in the brawling midst of apartheid South Africa was reckoned sensational.

Last night, Woza Albert! created by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon seemed, despite Sello

Maake ka Ncube's dynamic production, to be a curiously muted period piece. I suppose the producers, UK Arts International, believe young playgoers will be made freshly aware of how, decades ago, South African players valiantly used the forum of theatre as a means of eloquent protest against apartheid. But London audiences would have been far better served by a play dealing with contemporary ills rather than those from the recent past.

The stage for Ncube's production is bare, save for two wooden crates and a clothes rail packed with costumes and headgear. Yet the playing space is charged with the exuberant presence of the two performers. The mood drifts between that of dream-like fantasy, nightmare ritual and comic revue. The lithe, volatile Siyabonga Twala takes the more histrionic roles while the diminutive, ever-cool Errol Ndotho, who regularly dons a Comic



Alastair Muir

A mood that drifts between dream-like fantasy, nightmare ritual and comic revue: Siyabonga Twala and Errol Ndotho

Relief plastic nose, peddles an effective line in neighbourhood white tyrants. Brief scenes, which are broken by irritating, jerky blackouts, keep invoking the fierce regimented world of apartheid where bureaucracy is as fearful and implacable as anything Kafka envisaged.

Twala and Ndotho revel in the sardonic humour and try to compensate for the play's obstinately dated air with the dash and athleticism of their performances. Once rumours of Jesus's second

coming are noised abroad, excitement stirs and grows. The white-suited Messiah is greeted with the nicely bathetic plea: "Take us to heaven — it's terrible here." The South African Premier offers a more positive welcome: "Enjoy the fruits of apartheid." And the play reaches heights of irony when a white employer brands Jesus as that dangerous trinity of things, revolutionary, communist, and terrorist. The paraphernalia of repression is called out to do its grim duty. The Messiah may be seen

escaping by a walk on water; but Woza Albert! seems all set for an excruciating finale.

Expectations, though, are beautifully confounded. Twenty years ago Woza Albert's finale, with spectres of black heroes rising up from the dead, was an overwhelmingly sad, dream-like vision of escape from oppression. Today the scene is simply exultant: we know the battle's been well won.

● Until June 22. Box office: 020 8237 1111.

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translator David Greig  
directed by John Tiffany

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by Marie Ndiaye  
translator Sarah Woods  
directed by Dalia Ibelhauptaite

Wed 26 June 2.30pm

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by Philippe Minyana  
translator Steve Waters  
directed by Fiona Laird

Fri 28 June at 2.30pm

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# Punch and pathos in the rain

## THEATRE

### As You Like It

Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park

### Rachel Halliburton

Shakespeare's ebullient debate on the corruption of civilised society as opposed to the liberating anarchy of the countryside.

Benedict Cumberbatch sets the lively tone as a tantrum-throwing Orlando, whose rebellion against his oppressive brother, Oliver, provides a catalyst in the sub-plot of love and hate's simmering chemistries.

Kavanaugh has decided to play down the Sapphic implications of Celia's love for Rosalind, so that the former (Caitlin

Mottram) is merely a pouting girly brat demanding love from everyone, while Rebecca Johnson's appealing Rosalind is so feminine, even dressed up as a man, that her transformation in the forest becomes a subversive exercise in role playing rather than an exploration of her and others' sexuality.

Kavanaugh gets away with such decisions because despite investigating the broad spectrum of sexual identity, As You Like It plays far more with the form than the emotional substance of pastoral comedy.

Appropriately, clownish turns like the snooty urbanities of Touchstone (John Hodgkinson), and the melancholy games of Jaques (Christopher Godwin) prove ultimately to be the evening's most glittering prizes.

● Until 7 September, Box office: 020 7486 2431.

# A tale of mice and man

## EXHIBITION

### Dave Falconer

Modern Art, E2

### Nick Hackworth

FOR many people the chance to play the role of the artist is clearly a godsend, giving them a social licence to indulge their obsessive compulsive disorders. Some spend all their time casting negative spaces, some fill canvas after canvas with coloured dots. Dave Falconer, superficially at least, is obsessed with vermin.

Previously he has created tall, grey, tapering towers made up of a multitude of resin casts of dead mice piled on top of each other, as if they had been harvested

and glued together by some monstrous insect. Now he has created a huge, room-filling, grotesque ball of casts of dead rats and a wall piece to accompany it, both showing at the gallery Modern Art. Meanwhile, down the road, at the gallery run by the Chapman Brothers in Fashion Street, Falconer is showing a film of an elaborate mouse assault course that he has constructed in his studio and that he has used to put several of the little fellows through their paces. Up ropes they climb and through tubes and pipes they run in search for morsels of food that Falconer has concealed. The film is surprisingly compelling with a particularly nerve-racking vertical rope-climb during which the starring mouse pauses several times and looks down into the yawning chasm beneath to great dramatic effect.

Falconer's art owes much to the "schlock horror" aesthetic developed by the



The ratpacker: Falconer's grotesque cast

Chapman brothers. In common with their work, Falconer's is a tongue-in-cheek reminder of the skull beneath the skin. As they do, he references the world of grime and decay in an amused, ironic and jaded tone that precludes any real sense of disgust.

● Until 21 July. Information: 020 7739 2081.