

## The Arts

## Sins of the south

## THEATRE

Suddenly Last Summer

Albery

Nicholas de Jongh

TENNESSEE Williams, who shocked staid, 1950s audiences with plays steeped in all manner of sex and violence, invites us to an evening of vintage horror. Fortunately, Michael Grandage, the director of this fascinating operatic revival, premiered at Sheffield's Lyceum in February, is not afraid to risk the charge of emphasising those elements that cause some people to dismiss Suddenly Last Summer as preposterous melodrama.

Grandage allows minor roles to be caricatured, with a nun who looks straight out of The Sound of Music, but he persuasively conceives the play as a neo-Jacobean vision of evil and hell on earth, otherwise known as America's deep south. Here, acquisitive people regard each other as vehicles of their own desires, with nature turned cruel and predatory.

Christopher Oram's tremendous stage-set is a cylindrical drum, which bursts apart to a chorus of bird screams, murmurs and discordant music. A weird garden-conservatory of tree-like plants bearing blood-red flowers is disclosed, with distended branches resembling the grossly swollen veins of some prehistoric creature. The design reflects the timbre of the plot. Yet to have your dead, anti-hero — the gay aesthete Sebastian — eaten alive by hungry youths on the sea front, even though in a Third World country where food is in short supply, strikes a note even more grotesque than the setting.

Worse is to come. Sebastian's mother, Violet, played by a half-unrecognisable Diana Rigg in white whig, gruff, rasp of a voice and a wheelchair, makes wild demands. Mark Bazeley's absurdly wooden psychiatrist must perform a lobotomy on Victoria Hamilton's sedated



Alastair Muir

**Powerful:** Diana Rigg seeks her niece's incarceration with the unabashed, jovial shamelessness of the insane

Catharine, a niece who speaks the truth Violet refuses to contemplate about the son she incestuously adored. Yet a truth-telling drug, which causes Catharine to slip instantly into confessional mode about her cousin's last summer alive, strikes me as the play's one, unduly contrived mechanism.

Catharine's spell-binding revelation of Sebastian's gay deceits, decline and fall gives the play its late

dramatic momentum. Victoria Hamilton touchingly plays the girl as a loveless, child-like victim, plagued by her mercenary mother and brother. She relives the past in halting, breathless dismay.

Dame Diana makes little of Violet's grief for Sebastian and does not exude the malign villainy that Sheila Gish brought to the role. Her powerful, poisonous Violet, head craning forward like some

speculative tortoise as she beams her mocking, witt, charm in the doctor's direction, does something equally valuable: she seeks her niece's incarceration with the unabashed, jovial shamelessness of the insane. When finally the drum swings closed, it is as if ghastly skeletons in the closet are being hidden forever.

● *Until 31 July.*  
Information 020 7369 1740.

## A short, sweet homage to the past

## POP

Beastie Boys

Institute of Contemporary Arts

David Smyth

ALL three of them are approaching 40, MCA's hair is now more grey than not, and hip hop has acquired a whole new set of superstars in the six years the Beastie Boys have been away. As they made their live return this weekend in front of a tiny, sweaty crowd of Radio 1 competition winners, Mike D, Adrock and MCA revealed that they have finally stopped surfing the zeitgeist, but they remain as entertaining as ever.

In a short, exhilarating set with just the dextrous accompaniment of DJ Mix Master Mike, the trio unveiled three new songs from next month's new album, *To The 5 Boroughs*. Inspired by their home town of New York, the evidence presented here suggested that the album will have its gaze directed at the past, and the birth of hip hop in that city. The single *Ch-Check It Out* was an exuberantly old-school blast of cut-up horns and breakbeats, while *Triple Trouble* sampled the intro of the *Sugarhill Gang's Rapper's Delight*, rap's first hit.

They also raced thrillingly through their own classics past, including a radically reworked *So What'cha Want* and the bouncy electro of *Intergalactic*. They could have stayed for longer, but 30 minutes of the Beastie Boys was worth two hours and three encores from most groups.

## Body art to be welcomed

## EXHIBITION

Alison Lapper

Eyestorm Gallery, W1

Nick Hackworth

ALISON Lapper, made famous by Marc Quinn, whose 15ft marble sculpture of her eight-and-a-half-months pregnant will soon adorn the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, has been an artist for more than a decade.

She is also born without arms and with shortened legs. Her art consists of the photographic documentation of this fact, being mostly nude self-portraits. They intend to celebrate difference in a world increasingly swamped by commercially inspired images of a homogenised idea of physical perfection. As such they are welcome, though as art they suffer, perhaps, from being too literal.

Only in one piece, *Angel*, has Lapper significantly modified the image, adding angel wings to her back and a string of roses that



©Alison Lapper, courtesy of britart.com

frame the piece, which sends up the PC reflex to regard disability with automatic reverence.

In a series of self-portraits with Parys, her baby son, she has made the more minor change of colouring the arms that hold her son bright pink, highlighting their ambiguous relationship to Lapper, being simultaneously intrusive and supportive.

A final series of works are head-and-shoulder shots of Lapper pulling various faces and in several poses, some silly, some dignified, reminiscent of so-called "Body Art" from the Sixties that highlighted the highly political nature of the human body and its depiction.

● *Until 12 June.* Information: 020 7659 0860.

Sending up the PC reflex: Lapper's *Angel*

## Boogaloo boys show off their Sunday best

## DANCE

Breakin' Convention

Sadler's Wells

Sarah Frater

IF you saw the Saturday performance of *Breakin' Convention*, you'd drawn the short straw. Excepting Rennie Harris's rightly acclaimed solo, and some good breakin' sequences, the opening night of the mini hip-hop festival was disappointing. Indeed, during the last act, *Compagnie Kafig* from France, most of the audience drifted to the foyer, so unappealing was the action on stage (a mix of not-especially-good breaking and French comedic mime).

However, on Sunday night, the event soared, with four ace acts that showed you how hip hop might work in the theatre rather than in the clubs and streets where it began.

Respect, please, for the Electric Boogaloos, the group credited with

creating the style known as popping way back when. Group founder, and West Coaster, Boogaloo Sam has oceanic cool, sharp threads and thermo-nuclear charisma. He's also an expert freeze-flower, with smooth-rolling moves and sharply articulated elbows and knees.

Also excellent was Tommy the Clown and the Hip Hop Krumpers. Tommy is a big thing on the US West Coast where he started with traditional party clowning. Now, he includes a crack crew of krumpers, young and very young performers who shake their bodies until they rattle. There is a blatant sexual flavour to the moves, unsettling on some of the youngsters, but thrilling to watch on the grown-ups.

Also part of the bill were the Hip Hop Collective, good athletic movers (head spins, shoulder spins, one-handed handstand spins), while RubberBandDance successfully mixed hip hop and modern dance (every bit as tricky as it sounds).

Overall, a good night.