

## Reviews

Exercising pure  
British restraint

TO GREEDY modern eyes, fed on the visual equivalent of fast food, the lack of instant gratification on offer here may be alarming. Fifty pieces make it the largest Nicholson exhibition in Britain since the Tate's of 1993. They span 56 years of artistic activity, and chart Nicholson's progress from halting, naive and figurative to the quiet, abstract style he developed in the 1930s. It was this style that made him a leading British modernist, and to which he stuck until the end of his life.

Like many of his European contemporaries, Nicholson was interested in the abstract investigation of form and colour, but while many of them, like Mondrian, investigated boldly, Nicholson did so quietly. Instead of primary colours, it is light olive greens, greys, blues and beiges that

BEN NICHOLSON ★

Helly Nahmad Gallery, W1

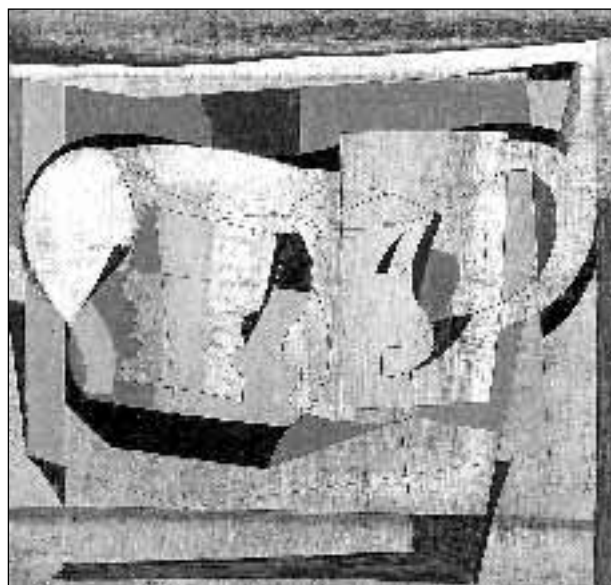
Nick Hackworth

fill the gallery, and instead of using bold, thick lines to mark off one shape from another, Nicholson creates his forms with gentle pencil lines or simple collage. Thus he emerges as a model of British understatement.

Inevitably, it is Nicholson's reserve that is his strength. It is the quietest and purist works that are the best in this exhibition. Several drawings from 1960 share a sense of an absolute and simple beauty: fluid, semi-abstract outlines of cups and jugs are marked out in pencil on cards stained with a sepia wash.

The same quality infuses Nicholson's carved reliefs, begun three decades earlier and influenced by his then partner Barbara Hepworth. White Relief 1936 consists simply of a board, painted white, with a shallow circle recessed on the right side and a square protruding from the surface on the left. While the fare may be simple and old-fashioned, the pleasure is enduring.

● *Until the end of November: 2 Cork Street, W1, Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 10am-1pm.*



Ben Nicholson's June 1949 (Lorca)



Over-pitched acting: Edward Peel

## Family saga still packs punch

AN INSPECTOR CALLS ★★

Playhouse Theatre

Nicholas de Jongh

NINE years after it first took the stage and all available awards, Stephen Daldry's thrilling, expressionistic reevaluation of JB Priestley's repertory war-horse still packs a real, theatrical punch. And the play's envisioning of the "fire, blood and anguish" that might be inflicted upon post-Second World War society acquires ghastly, prophetic resonance in the light of the terrorist atrocities on 11 September. Daldry envisages An Inspector Calls as a Ghost, Time and Morality play, with a cue or two from Pirandello. His production, after years at the Garrick, fits neatly into the smaller Playhouse, even though the third act spectacle, when the collapse of a house mirrors that of its inhabitants, is now slightly less dramatic.

Ian MacNeil's remarkable stage

design serves as an eloquent framework for Daldry's inventions. It converts the *nouveau riche*, Birling family's Yorkshire drawing room into a giant dolls' house, from whose insulating protection smart-dressed Edwardians reluctantly emerge. Nervily, they descend by spiral staircase to the mean, cobbled streets of the world below. Down there, Niall Buggy's eerily entrancing Inspector waits to question the Birlings about the recent suicide of a girl, for whose death each family-member proves to bear some responsibility.

Daldry aptly transforms the Inspector into a magical Prospero figure, who masterminds this Priestley play about selfishly Edwardian capitalists for hopeful, post-1945 Labour voters. There's a thrilling sense of strangeness as the Birlings are stripped of their pomp and circumstance, and, with all the trappings of realism gone, collapse in the street. Stephen Warbeck's musical score, although overloud, intensifies the ominous mood. The production's bracing, poignant impact is, unfortunately, diminished as a result of some wildly over-pitched acting, particularly from Edward Peel's blustering paterfamilias. But Diane Fletcher's haughty mamma is a fine period piece.

● *Box office: 020 7494 5372.*

## Glittering but dull

TO WESTERN ears, the opening notes of Uttar Priyadarshi sound unmistakably like the Last Post. It is a curious cross-cultural echo, because like the Last Post, this piece of Indian theatre focuses on the devastation of war, and develops the theme by offering a Buddhist interpretation, replete with giggling ghouls, comedy monks and a fabulous fake elephant.

But although this production is visually startling, and stridently rhythmic, it is a very difficult piece of theatre to engage with. Steeped in Manipuri traditions from north-east India, which use the whole body to express the human character, it is almost impossible to decode if you do not know your dharma from your korma. To which,

UTTAR PRIYADARSHI ○

Barbican

Rachel Halliburton

perhaps, the answer is — you should learn.

Given London's huge Indian population, this story of Ashoka could well be part of people's education: for he was a great empire builder between 272-232 BC (one century after Alexander the Great), who ditched flashing weapons and bloody victories to embrace dharma — an ethic of peace, tolerance and the welfare of all living beings.

Director Ratan Thiyam has created a production that has certain universal



Steeped in tradition: RK Bhogen

appeal. The depiction of Ashoka's procession into battle — with flashing silver spears and red banners — becomes a miracle of theatrical illusion, as a subtly lit elephant's head evokes the whole animal. The ghostly white figures of the war widows condemning Ashoka's victory haunt the memory too — almost as much as the giggling ghouls, showing off their execution machines in hell. But for the uninitiated Westerner, this is majestic but dull theatre. Thiyam claims to have created a theatre that uses sound and movement to go beyond text — and against that premise, the piece ultimately fails to engage.

The symbolic characters become mere glittering ornaments, and the story an interminable journey. The effect is beautiful but boring.

● *Until tomorrow. Box office: 020 7638 8891.*

## Not just hot air

RULE One when you're the American star with a European rhythm section is Treat 'Em Nice. You're in their hands, after all, and Curtis Stigers appreciates this. A former pop balladeer turned jazz crooner, he's been touring the UK for weeks and winning friends on and off stage.

Horror Tuesday found him in Aberdeen, where he fulfilled his gig with dour and unstinting professionalism. In Liverpool, he had to survive a heckler — "What does 'ballicks' mean?" — and by last night there was an air of mutual respect between him and the trio he quaintly introduced as "uptown Jeremy Brown on bass, Sebastiaan De Krom, the swinging Dutchman, on drums and Sir Robin of Aspland on piano".

Stigers's main jazz influences stem pretty obviously from Chet Baker, the late trumpeter and occasional singer whose poignant, lyrical style — not to mention sunken cheeks and dark, brooding looks — he

CURTIS STIGERS  
QUARTET ★★

Pizza Express Jazz Club

Jack Massarik

shares. Instead of inspired trumpet he plays just-OK tenor sax, but his voice is stronger and more pliable than Baker's was. He has a talent for phrasing in an airy, relaxed way that swings. And on grown-up love-songs such as But Not For Me, All the Things You Are, Let's Get Lost and the title track of his current Concord album, Baby Plays Around, he gives the lyrics an emotional yet manly run for their money.

In the second set, however, Stigers suddenly grabbed a folk guitar, adjusted his capo and strummed out earlier hits like Don't Go Far, All That Matters and Keep Me From the Cold. "I feel kinda dirty playing pop in a jazz club, but it's great," he admitted with a smirk. This was a bit of a jolt for some, but the all-girl tables out there in the dark (and there were several) lapped it all up.

● *Until Saturday. Box office: 020 7439 8722.*

## Theatre Club

Name: (Mr/Mrs/Ms) .....

Address: .....

Postcode: .....

Please enrol me in the  
Theatre & Music Club (No charge) Please enrol me in the  
Theatre & Music Club Gold Card  
 (£10 annual membership charge) Send this application together with a SAE to:  
The Secretary of the Evening Standard Theatre  
& Music Club, Northcliffe House,  
2 Derry Street, W8 5EE

LUCKY GOLD CARD NO: 100114

The winner will receive two tickets for Luther  
at the National Theatre at Royal Sadler's Wells.

LUCKY THEATRE CLUB NO: 4588

The winner will receive two tickets for The  
Little Foxes at the Donmar Warehouse.To claim either prize, call Pat Holloway on  
020 7938 7419 before next Tuesday.To join Theatre Club, send in the coupon. For  
Gold Card membership please enclose a  
cheque for £10, payable to Evening Standard.  
If you are already a member of Theatre Club and  
wish to join Gold Card, first-year membership is  
only £7.50.

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good,  
★★★ outstanding, X poor