The Arts

Kiwi Darby stands out in a funny crowd

COMEDY

Just for Laughs

Comedy Store

Bruce Dessau

IF you want to get to Montreal's Just For Laughs Festival in July, London in April is the place to start. Last year Omid Djalili played a blinder and boosted his prospects. This year's acts were consistently good, but rarely great.

Opener Brendon Burns never stood a chance. His wit can be positively poisonous, but 10 minutes was not enough to warm up. He was promptly outshone by fellow Aussie Steve Hughes, a journeyman joker on song, moaning about paying to get into Wales: "A theme park ... without a theme." The idiosyncratic Matthew Osbourne is definitely on the ascendant. This dapper mix of Prince Charles and Dynasty tennis coach hilariously mocked his own bouffant hairdo. Osbourne was followed by another smart act. Ian Moore's parenthood schtick was formulaic, but preferable to Nick Wilty's barely politically correct Jim Davidson off-cuts.

What would Canada make of Geordies Dave Johns and Gavin Webster? Both garnished familiar terrain with surrealism. Webster shaded this subplot, despite Johns' audacious Wittgenstein gag.

Jewish comedian Ian Stone was extremely funny, mixing topical and recycled material. His ancient anecdote about being heckled by someone shouting "bacon sandwich" is only just going stale. Matt Welcome also wheeled out old effective routines. Final act Milton Jones has a winningly daft persona but was unusually subdued.

The only outstanding turn? Rhys Darby, an excitable Kiwi with a penchant for silly noises. A touch too Robin Williams, perhaps, but he could have surfed all the way to Canada on the waves of laughter.

Alastair Muir

Vivid, violent vignettes of a life on the ocean: Iain McKee; Matthew Dunster, who plays two roles, and Sam Kelly

Drama on the high seas

THEATRE

Under the Whaleback

Royal Court Upstairs

Nicholas de Jongh

RICHARD Bean's enthralling play about Hull trawlermen who risk their lives by fishing on wild seas is not just social realism infused with raw humour. Admittedly it offers vivid, violent vignettes of a life reeling and rolling on ocean waves and of the fishermen's grim, precarious livelihood. And Richard Wilson's powerful, beautifully acted production is bolstered by Gareth Fry's stormy second act sound-effects that contribute to the mood of dizzying suspense. The fishermen under the whaleback, which is the curved deck at the bow, are hurled again and again from their seats. The ship's lights flicker and in the intimacy of the Theatre Upstairs, it almost felt as if the floor under us shook and shuddered, too.

Yet these are only atmospheric vignettes in the play's grand plan. Bean may sound a requiem for fishermen laid low and unemployed by the decline and fall of the industry, but such polemical accusations are peripheral. Within the framework of a play about men struggling for economic and personal survival, Bean is concerned with paternity and traditions of secrecy and concealment. He deals with a man who has never met his son, but finally identifies himself; with a son who never met his father but longs to know about him.

Each act is staged in a different ship and different decade, but always in cramped, claustrophobic crew quarters designed by Julian McGowan. In 1965, Cassidy, an alcoholic old deckhand, played with spell-binding charm and cynical exuberance by Alan Williams meets Iain McKee's gauche teenage "deckie learner" Darrell. This meeting proves both revelatory and life-saving for Darrell who reappears in 1972 as a canny deckhand in a catastrophic storm where Matthew Dunster's Norman in David Bowie T-shirt and Y-fronts worn over women's tights and Richard Stacey's Roc squabble over a girl, despite appearing smitten with each other.

In the final act, the crew quarters have been rebuilt in a Heritage museum where middle-aged Darrell (now played by Alan Williams) works after 25 years of being unemployed. Pat, a crazy, young entrepreneur, played by an unfairly cool Matthew Dunster arrives to inflict a horrific, misdirected revenge upon Darrell. He, like Cassidy and Darrell and their fathers, is a victim of this cruel, deep-sea fishing tradition which Bean brings to memorable theatrical life.

● *Until 3 May. Box office: 020 7565 5000.*

Iron Lady still stamps all over her critics

Peter J Jordan

Amusing: Love Letters by Grayson Perry

EXHIBITION

Thatcher

Blue Gallery, EC1

Nick Hackworth

GIVEN the loathing with which Baroness Thatcher is viewed on the Left, this group show is disappointingly tame.

Despite bringing together the work of 13 well-known artists, including the last two recipients of the Turner Prize, Martin Creed and Keith Tyson, the exhibition is largely devoid of the biting visual criticism of the Iron Lady once produced in the political cartoons of Gerald Scarfe, Steve Bell and Spitting Image.

It is, instead, full of oblique and, at times, simply lame responses to the lady and her legacy. The limpness of it all bears mute testimony both to the depoliticisation of British art in the 1990s and, more tellingly, to Thatcher's deep and long-lasting success.

She not only revolutionised the political and social landscape of the nation, but its culture, too. The key to her ideological victory lay in exorcising the British middle classes of their traditional class guilt; she convinced them that they were individuals.

This individualism is curiously mirrored in the attitude of members of the YBA generation who eschewed the idea that artists should act as the political and intellectual vanguard of society, spoke only for themselves and found they were naturally adapted for the increasingly sophisticated art market.

Nevertheless, some of the exhibits, at least, are effective. The most overtly political of which is Kenny Hunter's. The pick of his two sculptures is a small, black, two-foot high model of Thatcher with her arm outstretched in an almost fascist style.

Made of resin and coal dust and mounted atop a black oil drum, the work makes its resonant, albeit unsubtle, associations while remaining a powerful aesthetic object.

Even less subtle, but more amusing, is the contribution from Grayson Perry, the art world's favourite transvestite. His trademark ceramic vase is decorated with an image of Thatcher cradling a weeping child to her milky breast and a nice erect penis.

The best piece, however, is a beautiful and subtle image taken a year ago by British artist Paul Graham. It shows Thatcher with her head slightly cocked to one side and eyes downcast, set against a pitch-black background, a work that speaks about the transience of power and of the debilitations of age.

Bringing up the rear in the quality and interest stakes is a crowded group, including both Tyson and Creed. The latter deserves mention for his feeble, framed text piece that reads: "Something on the left, just as you come in, not too high or low."

In some contexts his work can be amusing in an arty in-jokey kind of a way, but here it is ridiculous. But even Creed does better than Belgian conceptual artist Kendell Geers, who has submitted a letter to the curator explaining that since his thoughts about Thatcher amounted to nothing, he would take part by contributing "nothing".

A blunt critique from the cutting edge.