

## The Arts

# Missing links in a marital meltdown

## THEATRE

## Lucky Dog

Royal Court Upstairs

Fiona Mountford

IT IS not often that one hears the dulcet strains of *White Christmas* and *Away in a Manger* in sunny mid-May. Such unseasonable tunes are well worth braving, however, if they accompany a drama that hits as many right notes as *Lucky Dog*.

"Yer missed the Queen's speech. Yer didn't miss much. Yer know what she's like," says Sue Webber to her husband Eddie as they sit down to a lugubrious Christmas dinner for two in Leo Butler's searing yet achingly poignant examination of family life turned sour.

The Webbers' son is passing the festivities with his fiancée's folks and this absence at the table looms as large as Banquo's ghost chez Macbeth.

Despite Sue's valiant attempt at the forced cheerfulness of small talk, it soon becomes apparent that this late middle-aged couple are living completely separate lives under one small roof.

It is what is not said, the silences laden with frustration and tension, that is just as powerful as the spoken word in James Macdonald's sensitive production. The unseen also has a palpable impact, as the eponymous ageing canine becomes the focus of thwarted parental love.

The key character in Butler's trio — the Webbers are joined temporarily by their neighbours' truculent young son, Brett — is Sue.

Linda Bassett gives an East is East-rivalling performance as a woman



Going to the dog: Sue (Linda Bassett) allows her frustration get the better of her in front of the neighbours' son, Brett (Liam Mills)

embattled by the myriad small cruelties of the everyday. It is impossible not to flinch as another tiny instance of marital neglect strikes this kind-hearted person with the force of a shard of ice. Alan

Williams's would-be adulterer, Eddie, is a master of the laconic phrase, and Liam Mills has just the right shrug-shouldered demeanour as Brett.

Only in the incongruous final scenes does Butler's writing, and plotting,

falter. Overall, those who named him Most Promising Playwright for his 2001 work *Redundant* should be delighted with their prognostication. ● *Until June 12. Information: 020 7565 5000.*

## Brel's cream lives up to the Belgian hype

NAME three famous Belgians, suggests Peter Straker, and most people would be stumped after Georges Simenon and Jean-Claude Van Damme.

But it is Jacques Brel, only 48 when he died in 1978, whom Belgium (and France, by osmosis) regard as its real superstar.

Rebel son of a bourgeois cardboard-box manufacturer, he wrote more than 400 songs of love, hate, joy and pain. Juicy subjects, these, and Straker, brilliant star of this new Brel special, doesn't hold back. With his matador pigtail and ballroom-dancer's suit, he's more of a ladies' man than angst-racked Brel ever was, but his battered-but-unbowed persona is just right.

His is the defiant smile of a weary charmer who has known both victory and defeat. Mel Smith's input as

## CABARET

Straker sings Brel

King's Head, N1

Jack Massarik

deviser-director is less clear. His set is just a barstool, some glasses and a café-quintet including the mandatory accordion.

His links — "Brel moved to Paris and never set foot in Belgium again" — are equally minimal, but the show is saved by the strength of the songs — Amsterdam, *Le Prochain Amour*, *The Drunkard*, *Ne Me Quitte Pas* — and Straker's eagerness to inhabit them. The venue, too, is ideal for cabaret, an intimate art whose adult values are perennial.

● *Until Sunday 6 June. Information: 020 7226 1916.*

## The precocious prodigy who took a turn into a cul-de-sac

EVGENY Kissin, as many have opined, plays the piano like nobody else. His formidable power, his accuracy, his reckless speeds, are all astonishing.

But there's something fundamental missing in his music-making. He seems to lack the ability to convey much sense of genuinely close engagement, and asks no questions. It's as if he's still the gifted child, glorying more in his achievement than in the music itself. Surely that's because his only teacher, Anna Pavlovna Kantor — still an omnipresence at his London recitals — has been guiding him since he was a gifted child.

Another mind, another adviser, would do no harm. Indeed, given that his musical development has taken a dangerous turn into a cul-de-sac, it's

## CLASSICAL

Evgeny Kissin

Festival Hall

Stephen Pettitt

probably now essential. Kissin's first half consisted of a testing hour of Chopin. It began with the two Polonaises, Op 26, where his compulsion to strike the key forcefully soon created some unfortunately typical ugly sounds.

Matters began to improve in the Four Impromptus, Opp 29, 36, 51 and 66. In Op 36 in F sharp major there was, for once, something of a meditative, quiet stillness, though I've known greater intensity. The improvement did not persist.

The *Fantasia-Impromptu*, Op 66, was cold and peremptorily, if brilliantly,

delivered, while the celebrated *A flat Polonaise*, Op 53, came minus its rightful panoply of colour and with two basic dynamics — quite soft and very, very loud.

After the interval, more thrills for those who had come for them, more disappointments for those with deeper satisfactions their goal. Nicolas Medtner's *Sonata Reminiscenza*, Op 38 No 1, was a welcome rarity but sounded in Kissin's hands rather too much like pale Rachmaninov.

It may well be that, but the reading was still insipid. And Stravinsky's *Three Movements from Petrushka* was a dazzling athletic achievement, but came devoid of any apparent understanding of the ballet's fantastical dramatic stance or of the piano's ability to suggest an orchestra.

## Is there a YBA in the house?

## EXHIBITION

Michael Landy: *Semi-Detached*  
Tate Britain

Nick Hackworth

A TWO-STORY, pebble-dashed house now stands in the middle of Tate Britain's long, neoclassical Duveen galleries. Its black-plastic guttering, net curtains and rough brickwork contrast nicely with the gallery's surrounding Corinthian columns and dressed stone; it is an alien incursion into this bastion of patrician culture.

But as spectacular a gimmick as this is, the real art lies in the middle of the house, where two giant screens show videos relating to Michael Landy's father, who has been unable to work since an industrial accident in 1977.

Though a member of the Young British Artist generation, Landy was always different. While the typical YBA response to the idea of commercialism was "Yes, please!", Landy questioned it in straightforward, non-ironic manner.

His *Scrapheap Services*, in 1995, highlighted the abject status of the long-term unemployed, and in his most famous work, *Breakdown*, executed in the old C&A store on Oxford Street in 2001, he destroyed all his meticulously catalogued possessions.

*Semi-Detached* treads similar territory, though the method is more oblique and personal than before. One video is a collage of still images taken from Landy Snr's collection of DIY manuals. Another is an extremely slow, close-up trawl across a shelf full of his personal belongings, from family photographs to DIY tools.

A soundtrack of him whistling *Danny Boy* adds to the wistful melancholy that envelopes the house, which becomes a poignant study of the way in which status is defined by work, and how the unemployed, like Landy's father, are marginalised.

It is this well-judged emotional tone, economical and understated, that exposes the viewer to the full force of a gentle, ordinary and common tragedy.

● *Until 12 December. Information: 020 7887 8008.*



Poignant: Landy's house at the Tate