

Going Out Reviews



Cry to arms: William Houston as Henry V rouses his battle-fatigued troops

Muscling in on history

STEEPED in blood, sweat and tears, the diverse elements of Edward Hall's inventively militaristic RSC production of *Henry V* don't always march to the same tune. The extent to which they do owes much to William Houston's towering performance, which commands the field in the title role. With everyone mucking in, Hall deploys all sorts of muscular ensemble work that is more typical of studio-based theatre than the classical tableaux that usually grace the Barbican main stage. But still the muscularity of Houston's central performance is the production's single biggest gun.

Transferred from Stratford, this Shakespeare history play is the one that features the warlike King Henry exporting the fiscal conflicts of his realm with the conquest of France and the bagging of a French wife. In the process, it is at least, in part, an investigation of the idea of Britishness, a concept that owes as much to myth and imagination as it does to historical and geographical fact. Accordingly, Hall's production con-

HENRY V ★
RSC, Barbican
Patrick Marmion

scripts all kinds of totems of British cultural identity to rally a dark and sometimes sinister production that is generally more visceral than it is intellectual.

Billy Bragg is therefore drafted in to write lager-lout refrains for pre-mobilisation party scenes. Ian Spink's movement contributes to choreographed manoeuvres that include the miming of landing craft like the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The battle of Agincourt is then fought out by thrashing punchbags with cudgels, while the imaginary victims mime their final agonies. In short, Hall throws in everything including the army barracks' kitchen sink.

But the play is also armed to the teeth with cameo roles. Adrian Schiller is a

booming Windsor Davis-type Welsh sergeant-major at odds with Richard Bremmer's beanpole of a mercenary trooper, Pistol. Alexis Daniel is a haughty French Dauphin who composes odes to his horse and Catherine Walker provides romantic combat as the minxy French Princess Katherine. However, everyone stands to attention when Houston storms the stage — barking orders, firing off soliloquies, rousing his battle-fatigued troops and laying siege to Catherine's reluctant heart. His performance, more than anything, masters both the play's and the production's divergent forces to deliver an impressive collective victory.

● Until 21 April. Box office: 020 7638 8891.

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

Less is less — more or less

EXHIBITIONS of sketches and drawings are traditionally billed as a privileged insight into the mind and working practices of an artist. This exhibition of works on paper supplies just such an insight into the world of Angus Fairhurst, though the privilege is a dubious one. Fairhurst, a fully paid-up member of the YBA club, has always produced an eclectic body of work, to say the least. He has exhibited paintings, annoyed gallery staff on the phone, broadcast the results and jumped around in a gorilla suit. At the recent *Apocalypse* exhibition at the Royal Academy he presented an installation entitled *Imagine You Are Top Banana*, a hall of mirrors and a light box, which declared with quiet fury: *Stand Still And Rot*.

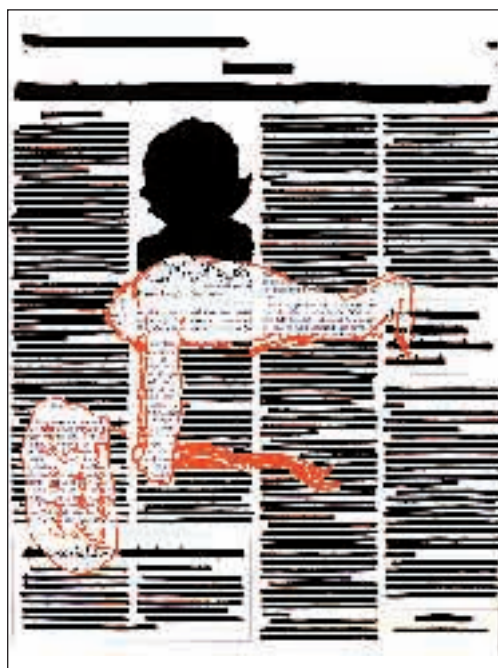
From the evidence of the sketches, mangled collages, abused postcards and animations that adorn the gallery walls, Fairhurst's restlessness has not diminished. A few coherent strands of interest emerge. One strand comprises images that have all evidence of human activity scratched out. A postcard featuring a quintessentially Nordic scene, with geysers spouting into the sky contains the ghostly forms of three

ANGUS FAIRHURST ○
Sadie Coles, W1
Nick Hackworth

humans reduced to white spaces, their presence erased by Fairhurst's obsessive hand. Another contains the form of a model reclining by a sparkling pool, her form also reduced to white negative space. This concern with the dissection of carefully constructed images extends to brands and advertising. A collage of adverts from glossy magazines hangs impotently from the wall, every sign of branding obliterated. Elsewhere, however, strands disentangle and it becomes impossible to tease out either meaning or value.

Chaos and ephemera rule: Invitations to art-show private views (including one to his own show) are daubed with skulls and random figures. Sketches outline proposals for monumental pieces of sculpture. In the corner a TV screen flashes with a short and simple text animation. The legend: "This does not last more than one second". Sometimes, however, self-awareness is not enough.

● Until 12 April. Tel: 020 7434 2227.



Scratched out: *Uninvited* (TJ Willcox), by Angus Fairhurst

Exhuming old comedy

STIFF ★

Riverside Studios

Rachel Halliburton

CAL McCrystal's much acclaimed undertakers' romp stakes out its comic terrain somewhere between Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* and *Fawlty Towers*. In this skewed tragedy of errors, an eccentric funeral parlour becomes the backdrop for everything from a botched seduction scene to dancing internal organs.

The Spymonkey theatre company has no problem with exhuming old comedy types, but, to its credit, they are cleverly and effectively realised. Forbes Murdeston is a great, but emotionally constipated, English actor, who wants to recreate the story of his wife's death. Unfortunately, the only actors he can find to play the undertakers constitute a Spaniard who could well be Manuel's cousin, a frosty German with a fetish for organ donor cards, and a female red-haired nymphomaniac.

McCrystal has set up the comic tension between Murdeston's melodramatic mourning and the mischievous undertakers. From the answerphone playing the lugubrious harmonies of Albinoni's *Adagio* and the cheesy greeting "Good morning, we're mourning!", through to a tombstone design competition resulting in a lurid fairy-lit crucifix, they are set on their own insane agenda.

As the straight man, Toby Park (Murdeston) has the most difficult task. You hear echoes of Shockheaded Peter as he protests that he is the only real actor on stage (my dears, he trained at Rada), and his main trick is to bat his eyelids as stiffly as if he himself were suffering from rigor mortis.

However, some of the play's best moments are when he joins the rest of the cast to produce their high-octane visual gags. There is an excruciating yet exquisite scene where he wrestles with the wayward corpse of his wife, played at this point by Altor Basauri.

Petra Massey is compelling and outrageous as the insane seductress, while Basauri and Stephan Kreiss form a gloriously incompetent double-act. Don't let this production rest in peace.

● Until 7 April. Box office: 020 8237 1111.

Theatre Club

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