

The Arts

Artificial intelligence

THEATRE

A Little Fantasy

Soho Theatre

Rachel Halliburton

PRIDE and prosthesis might be an appropriate title for the opening vignette in this deliciously warped evening, which inhales its spirit from America's Deep South and fills the auditorium with melancholic mischief. A Bible saleswoman visits a country household inhabited by two women and a philosophising son who has lost his leg in an accident. At first, the son snottily ignores the religious visitor, and grandly quotes Socrates rather than engaging her in conversation. Finally he lets her seduce him, only to discover this is an alternative leg-over — since once the sex is finished, she disappears with his false limb.

Fans of Flannery O'Connor will recognise this as a version of the short story Good Country People — except in the original the Bible-carrying seducer is a man, while the foolish philosopher is a girl. In this characteristically playful production, the company Told by An Idiot has woven together several themes from O'Connor's brutally ironic short stories, so that love, infidelity, racing mice, James Cagney impersonations and death are swept up into an evening of anarchic theatrical invention dominated by two female characters living outside the law.

Naomi Wilkinson's ingenious set — which initially appears to be four long wooden benches on an incline rising away from the audience — reveals itself as



Putting the fun into fantasy: Lisa Hammond as Lana and Hayley Carmichael as Carol

a versatile arrangement of trap doors and hidden pathways. Director Paul Hunter thrusts the audience into an alternative world by coaxing defiantly quirky performances from the five actors who leap into their various roles to create a

sinister comedy, right from the chicken murder that opens the evening through to the tales of imprisonment, theft, and death at its end.

Appropriately for a production in the London Mime Festival, it is the physical details rather than

the words spoken that make these stories special. Jane Guernier's nervous skip in the bowling alley, or Rachel Donovan's imitation of Jimmy Cagney with a grapefruit elevate these stories from pewter to gold. Yet as the outlawed women,

Hayley Carmichael and Lisa Hammond shine as the epitome of wicked joy. In this pleasantly offbeat evening, their partnership truly puts the fun into fantasy.

● Until 1 February.
Box office: 020 7478 0100.

New Dutch mastery to celebrate a rebirth

FOUNDED in 1870 by Willem III, King of the Netherlands, the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam was for a long time the Dutch equivalent of Britain's Royal Academy — in the days when it really was an academy and a place of intellectual enquiry.

Over time, despite producing famous graduates including Piet Mondrian, the health of the institution declined, and in the mid-1980s it was radically reinvented as a centre for postgraduate practice in the visual arts.

Every year it takes 30 young artists from around the world, each of whom are given access to studio space, unrivalled facilities and a network of internationally known artists and critics who act as visiting advisers.

This show, effectively a celebration of the success of Rijksakademie's recent transformation, brings

EXHIBITION

Rijksakademie

Victoria Miro Gallery, N1

Nick Hackworth

together work by 16 artists who all attended the institution within the past decade. Paintings, including a number by Michael Raedecker, an ex-Turner Prize nominee, and Tim Stoner, winner of Becks Futures in 2001, are on show, as are videos, sculpture and animations.

As befits an institution that grants great freedom to its attendees, the work carries no house style and varies greatly.

Amusingly, given the academy's history and art-world status, the best work on display is a dark, deadpan and irreverent eight-minute animation by Lars Arrhenius. The Man Without Qualities

(pictured right) is a classic of its kind. Using simple pictograms it tells the story of the eponymous "man without quality", an everyman for our times, who is born, grows, masturbates, marries, procreates, gets drunk, has affairs, spends a lot of time at a computer, ages and dies. Not a work that will go down in the history of art, but funny and affecting none the less.

Also good are Jacco Olivier's two more traditional animations, one of a woman swimming and another of a visual journey through a park, made up from two series of paintings.

In keeping with the dominant spirit within contemporary painting, the works here are quite simple, intent mainly on being visually attractive, as opposed to being about the state or history of painting. Kiki Lamers's two large and



The Man Without Qualities, 2001, by Lars Arrhenius

disconcertingly mauve portraits of a baby hold their own, as do Tim Stoner's stylised figurative paintings that emulate the look of the multi-layered 3-D images found in comics.

Given the success of its graduates, the reborn

Rijksakademie has been worthwhile. Whether Willem III would have been happy with the recent fruits of his ancient investment is unclear.

● Until 8 February.
Information: 020 7336 8109.

Bitter asides and a few whines

COMEDY

Al Murray

Lyric Theatre, W1

Bruce Dessau

FOLLOWING an epic tour, Al Murray's Pub Landlord has finally lurched into W1. For anyone who has not experienced this barroom monstrosity, his latest show, Who Dares Wines?, is the perfect introduction. If you've seen Murray before there is a sense of treading water here, but he is well worth revisiting for the moments when he turns that water into vin extraordinaire.

The Landlord still hates the French, has never quite embraced the Germans and now has the Iraqis — "Dune Fritzes" — in his sights. The new world order hurtles him into a tornado of confusion. At times this baby-faced bigot's rage borders on the Fawltyesque. No one since Cleese can curl up into a crimson foetal ball as effectively.

An entertaining foray into the world of regional accents is routine territory, but whenever there is a danger of coasting, mine host spins off on a bitter riff about losing custody of his sons. There are tangible echoes of BBC2's Marion and Geoff in the Landlord's ongoing familial isolation, but Murray was certainly there first.

When not in bluster mode, Murray's pea-brained alter ego can be unwittingly insightful. The ultimate theme of this cleverly constructed work is the question of what makes us human. His chromosome-related thesis is a tour de force only equalled by a breathless run-through of two centuries of French history. The diverting onstage pub-quiz finale is considerably less impressive.

Occasionally, he missed tricks. His usually sparkling audience banter never quite soared. Having picked out a fan from Denmark, he overlooked a sitter of a link between the punter and the Carlsberg he constantly poured from the onstage pumps. This is a minor quibble though. To paraphrase those lager ads, Murray is probably still the best character comic in the world.

● Until 15 February (not Thursdays and Sundays).
Box office: 0870 890 1107.

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