

On course for fame

STARSAILOR ★

Astoria

Max Bell

EVERY year the NME's awards dish out the raised middle finger gongs to bands at the, er, cutting edge. Last time around, Coldplay did the tour and came up trumps. In 2001, the Brats Bus has ferried JJ72, Amen, Alfie and Starsailor around the country, ending up last night with a prestigious show in the heart of London's bustling West End.

Starsailor played to a packed house at the civilised hour of 7pm. This Cheshire quartet are the latest new band to have had all manner of greatness thrust upon them without even releasing a single — their debut disc, *Fever*, is out today. Given that scenario, they did themselves considerable good with a breakneck set which crammed their limited repertoire into the pot and just about convinced everybody present that they may go far.

Singer James Walsh named his group after an avant-garde Tim Buckley album and borrows much of his overwrought imagery from Tim's son Jeff, who died in 1997. A trifle fey around the margins, your typical Starsailor song is built on an emotive lyric, as in the family tragedy *Alcoholic*, with Walsh's strummed guitar offset by a busy rhythm section and the melodic clout of Barry Weatherhead's keyboards.

At present, Starsailor are forgivably one-paced in places, although familiarity with tracks like *Coming Down* and *Good Souls* should provide contentment for daydreaming types, who will love Walsh's theatrical vibrato and gauche banter. If they go full steam ahead these Cheshire cats will be smiling all the way to the bank.

Melancholy star shines

THOMAS HAMPSON ★★

Royal Opera House

Tom Sutcliffe

MELANCHOLY was the unifying force in Thomas Hampson's recital, linking Heine and Whitman (obviously different) in atmospheric, rather self-obsessed, reverie.

Hampson's blackest tones suited the mood of Schubert's fierce, bleak, accursed *Atlas*. The sheer generosity of sound grabbed us. But the special gift of this wonderful American baritone's style is its seemingly carefree delivery — letting the voice speak naturally, not worrying about risks in a husky throwaway if an easy attitude suits the moment. Recitals are all about personality. By the end (a folksy, Yankee, increasingly sentimental second half) the audience couldn't get enough of Hampson, by then at his most relaxed. He doesn't slave at the vocal polish, but distills a suggestiveness which demands one listen beyond the surface of the sound (however exciting that very often may be) to where the idea of the song is tending, as it spins ahead in music and words. The Heine settings from Schubert's *Schwanengesang* had ravishing turns, real delicacy of phrasing, very descriptive rapt singing. The Mahler from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* were unusual and wide-ranging, with daring dramatic departures, high notes lightened dangerously and exactly moulded German. Wolfram Rieger, perfectly poised, accompanied marvellously.

The best of the Whitman American settings was Hindemith's *Sing on There in the Swamp* with Bernstein as runner-up. Ned Rorem's tempting sexual innuendo is ungainly. The final section (art and folk songs), led off with a magical MacDowell setting of a Goethe paraphrase: increasingly entertaining lollipops, above all evocative. Hampson, too seldom at Covent Garden, is an essential star.



Relaxed: Thomas Hampson



Testosterone titans: John Godber, Andrew Dunn, Zach Lee and Andrew Dennis

Bouncers pack a punch

BOUNCERS ★

Rachel Halliburton

Whitehall Theatre

THEY stand there, legs astride, each one a testosterone titan who looks as if he's capable of selling his soul for a decent pint and has all his best orgasms during the Match of the Day highlights.

John Godber's *Bouncers* has been so frequently performed since its appearance at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1982 that director Dominic Dromgoole recently wrote that it was impossible to gather 10 male actors without discovering at least a couple who have performed in this play; where men are men, and women are giggling accessories to handbags.

Godber's recent production of *Thick as a Brick* at the Greenwich Theatre, which dealt with a problem school in which teachers were more likely to suffer heart attacks than receive bonuses, demonstrated how his commendably ponce-free theatre can degrade into a bad case of over-simplified finger-wagging. The more playful *Bouncers*, however, is carried along by a rhythm and easy comedy which, at its best, evokes

Berkoff, without the manic glint in the eye, as it trawls the macho fart-and-shag world of four men who work on the doors of a Northern nightclub.

Appropriately for the world of the nightclub, the stage presents itself simply as an all-black interior, where the atmosphere can go from self-pityingly morose to ecstatic with the help of a few flashing coloured lights. Godber himself is one of the four actors who transforms himself from Northern lad to Northern lass (in his case, "plain Elaine, sweating like a racehorse"), as they depict a clubbers' arena where dolly-bird naiveté and aggressive alcohol consumption dance hand in hand.

Godber balances his punchy comedy with

a pathos, so that one moment you're laughing at *Sexy Suzie* (played with wonderful flirtatious va-va-vroom by Andrew Dennis), and the next you're thoughtful, as *Lucky Eric* (Andrew Dunn) depicts her eating cold pizza unemotionally while she is shagged against a wall.

Although both sexes are ridiculed in this play it is painfully obvious, watching it as a woman, that feminism still has a lot to do for these girls who act as if their hemlines are far higher than their IQs and who risk becoming teenage mothers in return for a *Babycham* and a quick fumble.

Visually, the production reaches its acme when Dennis and Dunn hilariously mime a porn film which might be subtitled *Postman's Knock*, while the zealously updated soundtrack provides a finger-tapping energy. This play may have been around for a while, but there's life in the old Godber yet.

● Until 24 March. Box office: 020 7639 1735.

Perfect contrasts

GIVE AND TAKE ★★

Serpentine Gallery/Victoria & Albert Museum

Nick Hackworth

THE most stunning moment in this exhibition comes when the viewer turns the corner into the V&A's sculpture gallery and is presented, in the foreground, with what is clearly a new and finely carved life-size figure of a female amputee. In the background, Antonio Canova's *Three Graces* hug in smug mutual appreciation of their idealised female charms. In the stark whiteness of their new marble and their ambivalent depiction of, for want of a better word, deformity, Marc Quinn's sculptures gently violate the classical assumptions about beauty which permeate the pieces around them. That, of course, is exactly what this exhibition, a collaboration between the V&A and the Serpentine Gallery, is about; the juxtaposition of the old with the new in order to bring fresh perspective to both.

At the V&A, Lisa Corrin, chief

curator at the Serpentine has placed the work of 15 contemporary artists, such as Marc Quinn, in the company of exhibits which both affect and are affected by the contemporary work.

Meanwhile, in the Serpentine, Hans Haacke, a prominent German conceptual artist, has appropriated more than 200 items from the V&A's collection and rearranged them into an installation that occupies the entire gallery.

Inevitably, it is the V&A's half of the exhibition which is the most powerful, where the contemporary work disturbs the complacency with which we normally view museum exhibits.

Another highlight is the dialogue between the large, glossy photos of Andres Serrano and the exhibits of the Medieval European gallery. His gory sub-



The old and the new: Budapest (Mother and Child), 1994

ject matter — decomposing corpses and cows' heads — helps to recreate a flavour of the visceral mentality that largely informed the medieval mindset, a sense that would otherwise be absent from this collection of objects shorn of emotive power within the sterile confines of their neon-lit vitrines. Haacke's

installation at the Serpentine, by contrast, is a little powerless, a random collection, largely of Victoriana, which is simply rendered absurd by lack of context and narrative thread.

Overall, however, the exhibition is a great success.

Ends 1 April.

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

Alastair Muir

Paula Cooper Gallery, New York