

The Arts

Noble's fantasy hits new heights

COMEDY

Ross Noble

Garrick Theatre

Bruce Dessau

YOU have to admire Ross Noble's work ethic. The industrious Geordie only completed his 23-night Edinburgh run of *Unrealtime* last week and now he's in the capital with an almost all-new longer version. For a dizzying display of improvisation look no further.

The addition of a second half does wonders, liberating this Merlin-haired wizard. Following a wry introductory animation featuring a sardonic slug with a drink problem, he can now spend virtually the entire first section bouncing freeform ideas off his audience.

In lesser hands this tactic could be indulgent or tedious. But the black-clad star can generate entire routines out of casual remarks. He soon chanced upon a couple who worked for the Refugee Council, prompting recurring thoughts on asylum seekers' fashion sense and modes of travel.

This echoes an unlikely political thread weaving

throughout Noble's patchwork surrealism. It says much about the current ministerial turmoil that even this resolutely apolitical jester is Blair-bashing. He suggests that British soldiers' boots melted in Iraq because they were made of marshmallow and that New Labour employed the late love walrus Barry White to sex up their dossier.

After the interval the act had a more formal structure, following a brief return to asylum seekers when Noble recalled some graffiti on a lorry which read: "Please overtake quietly, refugees asleep." A preplanned piece about a Baghdad looter on a hovering donkey was a beautifully honed flight of fancy.

Occasionally one can see the mental cogs whirring. Performances rarely pass without mention of Gandalf or monkeys, but Noble does rework his repertoire of images. Last night he speculated that the Refugee Council was based in Mordor and that tyre-obsessed chimps were laying siege to Kwik Fitts everywhere.

Cynics might say he is repeating himself, but Noble gets bolder each year.

There is more physicality now than in last autumn's Vaudeville Theatre residency. He is not



Not afraid of looking silly in a physical show packed with chuckles: Ross Noble at the Garrick Theatre

afraid of looking silly as he grinds his hips in mock ecstasy, gallops around or dances a jaunty jig.

This is a show packed with chuckles rather than belly laughs, but the only real

quibble is the pointless decor of alien greenery. Noble's vivid language paints an exotic picture already, without needing triffids in WC2.

During the encore someone asked if supportive audience

members were plants.

Noble is enough of a genius not to require plants in the stalls or onstage.

● Until 27 September. Box office: 0870 890 1104.

Project from the golden age of post-bop

JAZZ

Louis Hayes Quintet

Ronnie Scott's, W1

Jack Massarik

THIS tight-knit group is one of the best to visit London this year. Subtitled the Cannonball Legacy, its five Americans play the music of rotund alto-sax legend Julian "Cannonball" Adderley and his cornettist brother Nat, not as bland copyists but as contemporary artists committed to that style.

Hayes, a superb drummer who spent six years with the Adderleys, regards the project as completely valid. Jazz may have passed through many styles since the golden age of post-bop, but nothing has significantly supplanted its harmonic sophistication and full-blooded rhythmic drive.

Del Sasser, a surging theme over a stop-go drum figure, got things off to a breezy start. Vincent Herring, an expressive altoist, packed his solo with post-Parkerian wisdom. He's nearly 40 and in his playing prime, but Jeremy Pelt, a trumpet prodigy barely out of his teens, matched him for technique and invention.

The big youngster's beautifully restrained ballad feature, *You Go To My Head*, featured funky grace-notes and a warm, furry tone reminiscent of Clifford Brown.

Rick Germanson, according to Herring, "looks like my accountant but plays better", but this bespectacled, collar-and-tie pianist made a fine job of his feature number, *Dat Dere*. He couldn't emulate the natural soulfulness of its composer, Bobby Timmons, but then few pianists ever did.

Hayes, meanwhile, was cooking along with that compact, whippy action of his, a model of ergonomic efficiency. Even when soloing, as on *Fiddler On The Roof* — a Broadway hit which was the closest Cannonball came to klezmer — he kept the beat propulsive with little more than a flick of his wrists. And in this thrusting, shoving, me-first age, it was refreshing to find a bandleader prepared to let a sideman, Herring, handle the microphone announcements.

Louis Hayes is a true star. Long may his drums do the talking.

● Until Saturday. Box office: 020 74390747.

Poor show for faces drawn from the stage

NOW in its second year the Garrick/Milne Prize, with a generous fund of £30,000, aims to encourage the art of theatrical painting and portraiture.

Undoubtedly a worthy enterprise, it strives to restimulate a Great British tradition that saw its apogee in the 18th century with the works of Zoffany and Füssli, and had its last great exponent in Walter Sickert. Sadly, as with last year, the 60 or so shortlisted works are of a depressingly poor standard. As revealed by the BP Portrait Award, year on year, figurative skills are in permanent decline. The subjects here are crudely formed, their rendering sometimes descending into cartoonish mediocrity, the compositions incompetent, the colouring and the general handling of paint leaden and heavy.

This year's winner was Anna Hyunsook Paik who took the

EXHIBITION

Garrick/Milne Prize for Theatrical Portraiture

Christie's, SW1

Nick Hackworth

£20,000 first prize with her pedestrian painting, *Rehearsal* at RADA. Far better was Jackie Anderson's delicate and ethereal depiction of a Scottish dancer, unfortunately overlooked by the judges. Her work captures the essential impermanence of theatrical performance. The almost anonymous face floats in a sepia mist, with the merest hint of flesh tones providing an intimation of humanity. But her work was an exception.

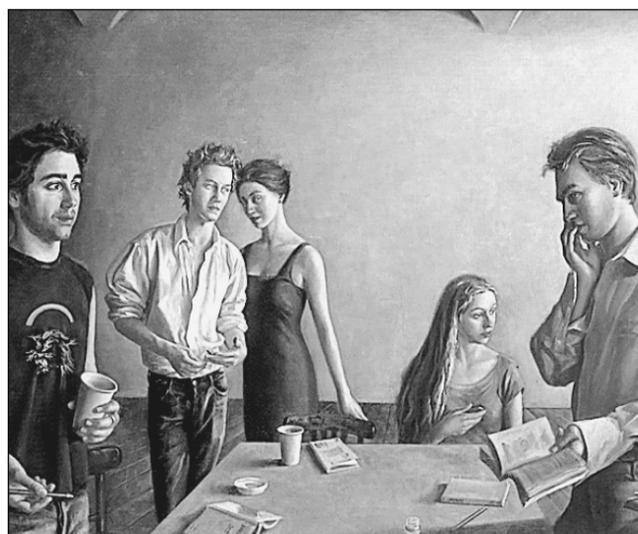
Not that a lack of quality necessarily means a lack of entertainment. Lovers of West End comedy will be delighted to see portraits of Ray Cooney, the

author of the amusing farce *Run For Your Wife* and the hilariously bad rendering of Elaine Paige in the role of Angele in *Where There's a Will*.

Those with more demotic tastes will be equally delighted to see Rolf Harris Prepares to Go On as well as the portrait of Peter Sallis incarnate as Norman Clegg from *Last of the Summer Wine*.

Meanwhile, more high-brow inclinations will be satisfied by images of Derek Jacobi as Prospero, Ben Kingsley as the Moody Chef and Timothy West as King Lear. Not that everyone was stuck in the past. Lucy Moore depicted funny-man Jimmy Carr; last year's Edinburgh Perrier nominee. But AA Milne's legacy, which funded the prize, would be better spent if there was less comedy and more art.

● Until 9 September. Information: 020 7839 9060.



Pedestrian: Anna Hyunsook Paik's prize winning *Rehearsal* at RADA

For great ticket deals, visit www.thisislondon.co.uk/tickets