



Spirited performances: Simon Dutton, David Michaels and Adrian Lukis

Waiting for Harry

VALENTINE Guinness, lead singer of the rock band Darling, has written a tissue box of sob stories and assembled a cast of crack film and TV actors to bawl them out.

First to turn on the taps in this fortysomething recrudescence of Peter's Friends, is Simon Dutton as a newspaper hack with a gambling problem who makes a point of only ever bedding foreign girls. Dutton is hosting a reunion of friends from college, 20 years on, in his scruffy little bachelor pad in order to help out wayward buddy, Harry.

First to arrive is David Michaels as an edgy barrister with a not very surprising sexual secret, closely followed by Adrian Lukis as a provincial sculptor who rues the day he failed to elope with a nubile charlady. The charlady happens to be the former girlfriend of Jay Villiers's depressed antiques dealer who is now locked in a sham marriage. Finally, there's James Wilby as a homophobic City slicker with a weakness for kinky sex. Collectively

HELPING HARRY ○

Jermyn Street Theatre, SW1

Patrick Marmion

the group guzzle gallons of drink and grieve over their mid-life jaundice.

The problem is not the sob stories themselves (we've all got one), but the way they are crudely stitched together. It may be Guinness's first play, but it is also an early draft. Individual stories are therefore tenuously precipitated and the consequences of sensitive revelations are often not always followed through. When they are followed through, as with one of the group revealing his gay transvestism, the reaction of another that he is "perverted" is not only unlikely among such tortured wastrels, it is also too dated to be worth dignifying with dramatic consideration.

However, the details of Guinness's characters' stories at least give them the

ring of authenticity and fuels spirited performances from director Nickolas Grace's boisterous ensemble. Dutton is a shilly-shallying nice guy hack, Michaels is a wounded, boyish barrister, Wilby a boorish broker and Jay Villiers a sullen antiques dealer imprisoned in a pinstripe suit. But Adrian Lukis stands out as a sardonic sculptor, busily laughing, goading, sulking and dreaming.

Will Bowen's set is a meticulously realistic bachelor pad complete with stopped clock, dead plant and septic fish tank. But neither this design, nor Grace's direction is able to infuse Guinness's play with the Chekhovian ennui it seems to crave. Despite a credit in the programme, the character Harry never turns up. Either he was cut at a late stage or he is a Godot-like hoax. In any event Guinness's likeable but ineffectual script is in need of the kind of group therapy that these friends intend to mete out to this missing character.

● *Until Saturday 10 February. Box office: 020 7287 2875.*

Saatchi snaps at the cutting edge

IT IS high time that ownership was accorded the creative status it deserves. Much in the same way that an artist may take found objects and from them conjure an installation greater in value than the sum of its parts, Saatchi accumulates artists and arranges them into pretty patterns, hoping, too, for an increase in value. Previously it was the Young British Artists and New Neurotic Realists (whoever they are). Now it's the turn of photographers and photo-realists. Planned well before Wolfgang Tillmans won this year's Turner Prize with an eclectic body of quirky photos, but neatly supported by his victory, I Am A Camera announces that photography is well and truly within the fold of cutting-edge contemporary art. Ten artists are shown. All either use photography or aim for a kind of photographic realism.

The stars of the show who provide the exhibition with a

Ratings: ○ adequate

★ good, ★★ very good,

★★★ outstanding, X poor

I AM A CAMERA ★

Saatchi Gallery

Nick Hackworth

clear thread are four photographers who employ the "snapshot" aesthetic to document "snapshot" content.

Richard Billingham's harrowing portraits of the domestic life of his underprivileged parents dominate one of the rooms. The degradation depicted contrasts uneasily with the sterility of the gallery environment. In another room, Tierney Gearon, an ex-model and "Saatchi discovery", displays a series of family snaps blown up to high-art scale. Her children frolic around, peeing, looking at dead animals and occasionally wearing spooky masks. The resulting photos are interesting and occasionally mildly disturbing. Pop art in the literal sense of that word, one might expect to find some of these images gracing forthcoming album covers. The centrepiece of the exhibition,



Unsettling: Richard Billingham's Untitled

however, is the tension between Nan Goldin's installation — a series of photos documenting the grotty lives of her Bohemian New York friends — and Jessica Craig-Martin's roughly cropped photos of desiccated and decaying New York socialites, which are hung opposite each other.

It is interesting that it should be the exponents of the "snapshot" aesthetic and "snapshot" content leading this Saatchi-sponsored charge of photography into the rarefied reaches of high art, for two reasons. First, it comes precisely at a time when the ubiquity of digital technology is democratising the process of

sophisticated image-making and manipulation. It almost feels as if this championing of the crude and the random is an attempt to preserve the higher ground of art photography for artists (as opposed to the masses armed with digital cameras and Adobe Photoshop software). Second, because what we see on the tasteful white walls of the gallery are images of the quotidian activities of fairly normal people. So why is it art? Because, as Damian Hirst observed: "It's in an art gallery, innit?"

● *Until 25 March. Open Thursday-Sunday, noon-6pm. Tel: 020 7624 8299.*

Triumph of the lounge lizard

ANDY WILLIAMS ★★

Royal Festival Hall

Max Bell

AFTER six decades in the music business Andy Williams has reached a satisfying level of status that renders him untouchable. While he earns a living in America playing sold-right-out cabaret shows in his Branson, Missouri theatre, in Europe he's the lounge lover's hippest choice.

Williams's first show here in 20 years satisfied fans of all age groups. During the opening half he crooned in his dinner suit before slipping into something more casual for the remainder of an expertly paced set that allowed the 73-year-old room to manoeuvre across a range of classic hit material.

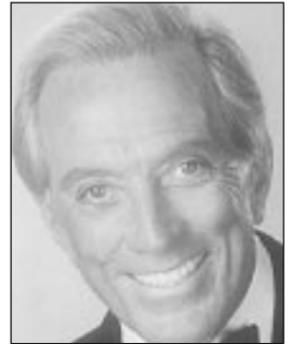
The svelte and elegant singer swung easily through the gentle rock and roll of Butterfly to the brilliant polish of Pomus and Schuman's Can't Get Used To Losing You, complete with its trademark pizzicato that still sends a shudder down the spine.

Effortlessly romantic, Williams's warm baritone still works because the man is so sure of his touch. For Almost There he stood back and watched his younger self serenading Sandra Dee in footage from the film I'd Rather Be Rich, including a sequence of the current Andy cut into the action.

Not many artists in his position would have the capacity to spoof themselves so readily.

Academy Award winning songs like Moon River and Days Of Wine and Roses were reminders that Williams is a class act but so were surprises like The Hawaiian Wedding Song, which encouraged his immaculate singers to harmonise à la Patti Page.

Williams kicked off the second section with Music To Watch Girls By, the super-slick easy listening anthem that launched the lounge movement anew. If it's true that these will be his last performances in Britain then he is going out on a genuine high. They really don't make them like this anymore.



Andy Williams

Verdi's epic of light and shadow

VERDI REQUIEM/LSO ★★

Barbican

Tom Sutcliffe

VERDI isn't orchestral repertoire. But what better way to celebrate the Verdi centenary than with the LSO rising to the challenges of the Requiem — with such lovely refinements as the ethereal aura added by first fiddles to the soprano and mezzo's Agnus dei duet, or the chirpy rising bassoon phrase recycling a Don Carlos out-take, or the unanimous re-echoing reveille for big drum and "last trump" brass (pairs spotlight either end of the first tier) making the hall shake at Dies irae.

Verdi's masterpiece sums up all we love about opera and music-making generally. It also says something crucial about the human burden, something which is strangely at odds with 19th century religiosity. Management of the tensions between operatic personality and semi-liturgical language, between vast imaginative and architectural scale and a thrilling almost sporty sense of musical and vocal display, is the challenge for the conductor and Antonio Pappano's fresh energetic conducting balanced the elements with consummate sensitivity. Perhaps the earth-shattering thumps of the Dies irae were over-driven. But the contrast between the small pianissimo opening voices and the erupting battle screams of trumpet and chorus leads eventually to Lacrimosa, where the conductor's measured unselfish expansiveness was founded on the preceding headlong rush.

It calls for an operatic approach, for proper relish that (for instance) Verdi recycled the dancing Sanctus years later in the second act of Otello. Pappano, a maestro more player than gent, is a natural Verdian, firm, uncompromising. The singing was less appropriate. The London Symphony Chorus's enthusiasm is not the same as Italianate tone. The solo quartet, a mixed bag, formed a musical but not idiomatic ensemble. Soprano Rénee Fleming, wonderfully elegant and poised, demonstrated exquisite style with a golden wisp of tone tracing a downward portamento. But she doesn't have the warmth and colour and strong chest voice ideally needed. Lithuanian Violeta Urmana's mezzo sounded generous and rich in Lux aeterna. Rene Pape, marvellously polished and precise, was more Pere Germon than a cavernous bass. Jorge Antonio Píram, standing in for Ramon Vargas, only settled down more comfortably once his tenor highlights were passed.

● *Also tomorrow. Box office: 020 7638 8891. Recorded for subsequent BBC 2 telecast.*