

The Arts

Treading the line between surreal and silly

COMEDY

Club Seals

Soho Theatre

Bruce Dessau

CONTEMPORARY sketch comedy faces a number of hurdles. It has to be very good indeed to shake off the spectre of the insipid college revue. It should also be original. Ensembles must avoid the grotesquerie of *The League of Gentlemen* and the comic-book juvenilia of *The Fast Show* unless they can improve on them. The Club Seals team embraces every challenge and nearly pulls it off.

Their current show, *Museum of Everything*, rattles through a panoply of set-pieces inspired by galleries and heritage centres. Marcus Brigstocke, Danny Robins and Dan Tetsell, who made the pocket-sized BBC2 cult *We Are History*, juggle roles and accents in the same way as the aforementioned League champions, but the humour here is less dark,

more Dadaist. This is a world where gift shops sell Jane Austen-shaped fudge.

However, there is a thin line between surrealism and plain silliness and this trio frequently leaps it. An undersea adventure tour is narrated by a whale and features Brigstocke, familiar to sitcom train-spotters as the star of Simon Nye's underrated *The Savages*, sporting a toy octopus on his head and dancing to reggae, the tentacles doubling as dreadlocks.

The problem is not inadequacy of talent but an overwhelming obsession with popular culture, which leads to laziness. There are predictable nods to icons ranging from *The Simpsons* to Indiana Jones. A running gag of Robins listening to a taped gallery guide which informs him that paintings by Turner, Hogarth and Gainsborough feature his mum in compromising positions is too close to Newman and Baddiel's *History Today* repartee for comfort. But when this



Exhibitionists: Danny Robins, Marcus Brigstocke and Dan Tetsell are no museum pieces

threesome unearth their own niche they are both funny and original. A brilliant skit looks at man's relationship to wicker, with Tetsell and Robins playing automatons in tableaux vivants. There is also

some effective, if Pythonesque, animation. *Museum of Everything* has a rapid-fire structure which means that low points swiftly pass.

Unashamedly schoolboyish, but sporadically inventive,

there is much to praise. Brigstocke, Robins and Tetsell lack consistency, but they certainly excel at making an exhibition of themselves.

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

Jolly journey that exudes worldly charm

THEATRE

Around the World in 80 Days

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

Mark Cook

WITH the speed of travel and the likes of Michael Palin globetrotting for our armchair amusement, getting round the world in 80 days doesn't seem like much of an achievement these days.

A modern-day version of Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg might like to attempt something really difficult — like circumnavigating the Circle line. But that wouldn't make terribly interesting theatre, and writer-director Phil Willmott — who knows a thing or two about crowd-pleasing family shows — has cannily spotted that Verne's story offers a whirlwind of exotic locations and eclectic song styles.

This reworking of the version, first seen at the Battersea Arts Centre, finds the straight-backed, strait-laced Fogg, played by Stephen Beckett (whom Coronation Street fans will remember as hunky medic Matt) as a lite Brian Blessed (though that may be down to sound-level problems) leading the troubled trek

through the Moulin Rouge, the Indian jungle, Hong Kong opium dens and the Wild West.

In this he is hindered by both friend and foe; the former being the sweet but disaster-prone Passpartout — an appealing Tim Mitchell proving one of life's great unfairnesses that French-accented English sounds so much cuter than English-accented French — and the latter being the villainous, eye-patched Captain Fix, given a nice line in suave camp by Dominic Gray.

Willmott's score is cheekily serviceable — the highlight being a wacky number extolling the virtues, at least for polygamous men, of Mormonism — but West End-musical-style ballads put into the mouth of a 19th century Indian princess (however well sung by Emma Thornett) jar somewhat. The lyrics are pretty dodgy, too.

That said, the production winds up to a breathless, romance-filled, feelgood finale, and the cast exudes infectious charm and energy.

A rather jollier journey than on the Circle line.

● *Until 1 February. Box office: 01483 440000. Richmond Theatre, 4-8 February. Box office: 020 8940 0088.*

Signs of subversion in a derelict gin factory

EXHIBITION

Gustav Metzger

Bedford House, E1

Nick Hackworth

A GENUINE, if eccentric, radical in a field crowded with pseudos, Gustav Metzger has, for 40 years now, operated on the fringes of the art world, making work that has often been both innovative in form and politically engaged in content. He is best known for his invention, in 1961, of "Auto-destructive art" — art that carried within it the seeds of its own downfall as a mirror to the destructiveness of man and as a protest against the capitalist art market.

In public he performed "acid paintings" where, resplendent in a gas mask, he painted huge canvases with acid that dissolved before the audience's eyes. Since then, he has developed "Auto-creative art", went on an "art strike" between 1977 and 1980, when he called on all artists to stop working, and has continually used work to critique the operation of the capitalist system.

Arranged by a new "nomadic art collective", T12, and staged in a dark and derelict Victorian gin factory just off Brick Lane, this exhibition is very much an "authentic" fringe art show, which should please anyone bored with pristine, white, commercial galleries. In the large basement Metzger has stacked vast numbers of newspapers and on a wall inscribed six titles — Disasters, Biotechnology, Extinction, GM Foods, Information Overload and, oddly, Supermarkets. Visitors are meant to cut out articles from the newspapers and pin them up underneath the relevant category, thus critically engaging with the media.

This unsophisticated work is, sadly, not one of Metzger's best, but given the rarity with which he shows and the romantic surroundings, it is still worth visiting. Also, despite being billed as a solo show, it includes some amusing video work by the artist and critic Stuart Home.

These include an Eisenstein classic set to a punk-rock soundtrack, its subtitles replaced with those from another film; and *Has the Litigation Already Started?*, which intersperses excerpts from *Nosferatu* — whose makers were sued by Dracula author Bram Stoker's widow — with film copyright credits. Finally, a moving short film, *The Park*, by Wolfe Lenkiewicz, conjures fragmentary tales from footage shot in a park in east London.

● *Until 23 March, Wednesdays to Sundays only. Information: 07813 532012.*



An image from *Nosferatu* in the film by artist and critic Stuart Home

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