

If only we could just listen to the music

THEATRE

Performances

Wilton's Music Hall, E1

★★★★☆

Nick Curtis

A CONCLUDING performance from the Brodsky Quartet is by far the best thing in Brian Friel's unusually clumsy play, which summons up the ghost of the Moravian composer Janacek and rummages through his dirty laundry. Friel asks whether knowledge of the grubby roots of inspiration adds to or detracts from appreciation of sublime art, but this event is far from sublime.

Friel seems to admit his script's inadequacy when Henry Goodman's spectral Janacek declares that "those who huckster in words" cannot match musicians who "speak feeling". Lou Stein's hesitant production supports the point, especially when the Brodsky musicians stop talking stiffly and start playing beautifully.

So, Janacek's ghost is in a contemporary rehearsal room with these musicians, who josh campily and call him "maestro". Along comes earnest student Anuzka, who is determined to prove that Janacek's late-flourishing creative surge was due to a grand, transforming passion for Kamila, the apparently dumpy and dim younger housewife he besieged with protestations of love (unreciprocated) and about 700 letters (reciprocated) from the age of 62 to his death at 74.

Anuzka is played by the decidedly un-dumpy Rosamund Pike, but her academic credentials are established by the fact that she wears glasses. This is not a meeting of characters, but of archetypes. Goodman's twinkly but pompous Janacek is the self-ish creator, the "real pig" who claims he faked a passion and invented an idealised Kamila in his head to fire his compositions.

Pike's Anuzka represents the strain in all of us that wants to quantify or denigrate genius as



A meeting of archetypes: Janacek (Henry Goodman) and Anuzka (Rosamund Pike)

thinly-veiled autobiography, but she also has her own agenda. A romantic feminist, she can accept Kamila as an idealised muse, but not as base clay for Janacek's imagination.

Interestingly for these literal times, it's the degree rather than the fact of Kamila's significance that is debated, but the execution

remains poor for a writer as nuanced as Friel. The play is full of thudding, expository lines like "such a pity she insisted you destroyed most of her letters to you". Goodman is bombastic while Pike falters for her lines.

The show ends with the Brodsky Quartet performing *Intimate Letters*, Janacek's jagged and fraught

musical transposition of his fevered correspondence with Kamila. It's far more expressive of their relationship than what's gone before. "You would learn so much more if you just listened to the music," says Goodman's Janacek at one point. Well, quite. **● Until 15 July. Information: 020 7702 2789.**

WHAT ELSE IS NEW...

JAZZ

Polly Gibbons

Pizza Express Jazz Club, W1

★★★★☆

Jack Massarik

A LATE nominee for next week's annual BBC Jazz awards, vocal discovery Polly Gibbons deserves a surge of votes. There's a rare sense of joy in her voice, not to mention a depth of blues feeling unusual in a white singer and a nifty, fast-running vibrato reminiscent of her early heroine, Street Life hitmaker Randy Crawford.

Big, bonny and with a sunny smile, Polly cheerfully admits to being a pig farmer's daughter from Framlingham, a no-nonsense Suffolk spot where folk probably start work at 5am.

Naturally, her patter got straight to the point.

"It's pretty hot up here, despite the air-conditioning," she observed before introducing *Cry Me a River* as "Fry Me a Liver" and pointedly aiming *Speak Low* at a persistent chatterbox on Table Five.

Bye Bye Blackbird, prefaced with a neat Charleston stop-go arrangement, found her trio's excellent pianist Tim Laphorn dropping bows to Horace Parlan and Wynton Kelly before Polly's semi-scat vocal bent the lyrics into melismatic new shapes.

Georgia and Aint That Lovin' You were dedicated to "The sadly late and very great Ray Charles," who would be proud to find his seminal influence permeating even darkest East Anglia. Sing on, Polly.

● Tonight: US tenorist George Garzone. Information: 020 7439 8722.

COMEDY

No Planet B – The History of the World Backwards

Tricycle Theatre, NW6

★★★★☆

Bruce Dessau

WHEN Robert Newman appeared with David Baddiel at Wembley Arena at the height of the comedy-as-rock-and-roll hysteria in 1993, one sketch was the academic spoof entitled *History Today*. Yesteryear now has a starring role in his intellectually ambitious yet accessible *No Planet B: The History of the World Backwards*.

As in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, Newman creates a universe turned upside down. This is a great premise for satire. Nelson Mandela enters prison a Spice Girls fan and comes out a terrorist, Columbus is the last white man to leave America. There is a further serious subtext. Newman is

History man: Rob Newman strums his ukulele



obsessed by capitalism's oil fixation and the narrative leads inexorably to the pre-petrol age.

Other highlights include a fine-tuned Paul McCartney impression and some relentlessly lo-fi music, with our frock-coated guide strumming a mean ukulele.

This is clearly not your conventional stand-up gig. But, compared to Newman's previous post-Baddiel political shows, there is no hint of a nigger that this is more lecture than light entertainment. *No Planet B* is never as earnest as it sounds — there is even a pithy Elephant Man gag that Jim Davidson might envy.

● Until 15 July. Information: 020 7328 1000.

Visual journey into the unknown

WITH his high-impact visual style, his interest in mass culture and tendency to roam across media, French artist Pierre Huyghe, 44, would have slotted neatly into the pack of Young British Artists. For this show he deploys his talent for encapsulating ideas on subjects as diverse as the exploration of the unknown, the creation of new festivals, such as the poignant *Streamside Day*, the proliferation of anniversaries in the calendar and the independence of fictional characters.

It is in this last arena that Huyghe has produced his most touching work. Collaborating with fellow artist Philippe Parreno, Huyghe bought the rights to a Manga character — the big-eyed young girl, Annlee — and cast her in posters and films. In a final act recorded in a video shown here, *A Smile Without a Cat*, Huyghe employed a lawyer to give the character legal rights over itself and thus allow it to escape from the world.

He marked the event with a huge firework display in Miami in which an image of Annlee, etched in fire, burned brightly then faded into nothingness. The theme is echoed in another video, in which the

EXHIBITION

Pierre Huyghe: Celebration Park

Tate Modern, SE1

★★★★☆

Nick Hackworth

actress who dubbed the voice of Snow White in the French version of the Disney movie talks about how she, in some sense, had become Snow White herself.

Exploring such slippage is a driving force of Huyghe's work, seen also in a series relating to a trip to the Antarctic in 2005 in which Huyghe hired a scientific vessel to sail through the Southern Ocean in search of new islands revealed by the retreating ice and a strange, white, creature, known only by random, uncertain sightings. The video of the voyage through the otherworld of ice floes and inhuman terrain is, like much of Huyghe's work, both thought-provoking and strangely moving.

● Until 17 September. Information: 020 7887 8888.



Deer girl: the *Streamside Day* video, 2003

CLASSICAL

Duke Ellington: The Sacred Concert

St Paul's Cathedral

★★★★☆

Nick Kimberley

STAN TRACEY has been one of the great British jazzers for so long that he should have generated a festival-load of tribute bands. Instead here he was, at almost 80, leading his own band in tribute to Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concert*, an unfolding suite of religious pieces. It may not be the best way to hear Tracey but there is no doubting Stan's sincerity.

Although the St Paul's acoustic is unruly, the sound-decay that greets the end of a piece has the quality of a wondrous organ chord. Nor did the amplification always

favour the performers, sometimes burying a solo flourish and often losing Tracey's piano altogether.

Even so, the players' casual precision generated real energy. Despite moments of vocal stiffness, Niall Hoskins and Norma Winstone had eloquence and a hint of fire, but hard though they tried, St Paul's Cathedral Consort would have made the Ray Conniff Singers sound funky. To close the show, Will Gaines delivered his tap-dancing party-piece, and the crowd went as wild as it is possible to go in St Paul's.

But if only there had been more of Tracey. Only near the end did he deliver an extended solo, Ellington's *Meditation* allowing him to demonstrate that his fractured lyricism and rumpled grandeur remain intact.