

Plane crash survivors' tale is descent into madness

Humour of first half becomes uncomfortable to watch



■ Mathew Baynton delivers a brilliant performance as Gus who turns to duty-free after the crash

Picture: Idil Sukan Draw HQ

HOLES Arcola Tent

★★★☆☆

A wickedly funny portrayal of the human response to disaster, *Holes* evokes guilt-inducing laughs from the audience.

Tom Basden's in-the-round comedy plays out on what appears to be an adult-sized sandpit, strewn with suitcases from the wreckage of a plane crash.

Four survivors attempt to process the scenario with painfully humorous observations such as "typical, that always happens to me, these transport cock-ups!"

Mathew Baynton delivers a brilliantly frank performance as Gus, whose shrewd remarks about fellow colleagues Ian (Daniel Rigby) and Marie (Elizabeth Berrington) highlight the absurdity of the situation

and their reactions. As he turns to duty-free alcohol, the decline in his behaviour is an eye opening, albeit funny presentation of gut-wrenching desperation and his character's inability to cope with it.

The character of Ian is an outrageously on-point representation of the modern man and his belief in technology and power.

Structure

While attempting to implement structure to their lives, he in turn gives some of the wittiest lines, and Rigby's poker-faced performance is applaud-worthy.

Having opened in the aftermath of the flight MH17 crash, grisly jokes about the death of passengers and the state of the pilot's body could be considered to toe the line of appropriateness.

That being said, the inconceivable timing of the play's London de-

but doesn't take away from the ludicrously entertaining dialogue between characters directly after the crash.

Still, the less-than-smooth transition in the second half towards a more sobering descent into madness is difficult to follow and, at times, uncomfortable to watch.

While there are still plenty of funny quips from Rigby, there isn't enough entertainment on stage to engross the audience and distract from the uncomfortably warm setting of the Arcola Tent.

Though Basden's razor-sharp wit is undeniable, the play that started out so devilishly moreish waned towards a somewhat unsatisfying finish that demanded more of the fast-paced humour of the first act.

Until August 9 at Arcola Tent, Ashwin Street. Tickets from £17.50, arcolatheatre.com

Charlotte Elmore



■ Helen McCrory as the killer mother

Picture: Richard Hubert Smith

McCrory magnetically powerful

MEDEA National Theatre

★★★★☆

It's an "unthinkable" crime, yet all too fathomable in Carrie Cracknell's electrifying production. Her modern setting for Euripides' masterpiece is unobtrusive, allowing the discomfort that comes from viewing horror in a familiar setting to creep upon us during a riveting 90 minutes.

Assisted by Ben Power's lucid, resonant adaptation, Cracknell builds a fascinating mental framework for Medea (Helen McCrory), who embraced exile and murder for her beloved Jason (Danny Sapani), only to be abandoned for another woman.

The terrible inevitability stems not from the fates, but from the psyche of someone brutalised by conflict, shattered by betrayal and left dangerously isolated, her identity ripped from her. The strong, empathetic Chorus (with Jane Wymark a standout) urges Medea away from grave action even as they draw vicarious satisfaction from it, and our similar complicity makes the bloody outcome deeply unsettling.

Magnetic McCrory gives a performance of devastating power,

believably cycling through Medea's jarring emotions. She begins a darkly sarcastic shell, but as grief fuels her, she savours the deadly logic that leads her to re-take control at a terrible cost, primal vengeance paired with heartrending anguish.

McCrory expertly employs Medea's feminine weapons, extracting mercy from Kreon (Martin Turner) with weeping, trembling and swooning, and transforming her "woman's weakness" into strength, most chillingly when coaxing her children to deliver death to her enemy. Sapani's Jason is stubborn and unfeeling, then quietly moving when his self-assurance is demolished. Dominic Rowan's credulous Aegeus is effective, but Nurse (Michaela Coel) lacks gravity in her framing speeches.

The accessible drama gains a mystical quality through Goldfrapp's music, with its insistent pulse, throbbing strings, operatic cries and fugue-like climax. Lucy Guerin's figurative choreography is intriguing, but pulls focus. It's an unnecessary addition to such a shrewd reading, with a villain who is all the more harrowing for her palpable humanity. Until September 4. **Marianka Swain**



■ Shakespeare in Love at Noel Coward Theatre

Picture: Johan Persson

Love story's transfer from screen to stage

SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE Noel Coward Theatre

★★★★☆

Many will already have seen the Oscar-winning film version of Shakespeare in Love by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, starring Joseph Fiennes. Now a fantastic new stage adaptation has opened at the Noel Coward Theatre.

Promising young playwright Will Shakespeare is tormented by writer's block until he finds his muse in the form of passionate noblewoman, Viola De Lesseps.

Meanwhile he is unaware that Viola, herself in love with the theatre, has contrived to spend time with him by disguising herself

as a boy actor in his company. Their forbidden love draws many others, including Queen Elizabeth, into the drama and inspires Will to write the greatest love story of all time, Romeo and Juliet.

Lee Hall, known for his Billy Elliot, has adapted the original screenplay for the stage, but has remained broadly faithful to the original. And the story is given a fresh new lease of life by the staging of Declan Donnellan and the designs of Nick Ormerod, which provide an Elizabethan playhouse as a back-drop for the scenes.

There is a huge cast of 28 actors and musicians, as well as a crowd-pleaser of a dog that has a key part to play. Together they take you

back to Shakespeare's London, teeming with vibrant colours, characters, music and life.

Tom Bateman plays the impetuous and love-struck young Shakespeare with aplomb and Lucy Briggs-Owen gives a beautiful and determined performance as Viola. David Oakes is splendid as Will's friend and fellow playwright, Christopher Marlowe, who helps with Will's writer's block and his attempts to woo Viola.

The play is half an hour too long, but the fast pace keeps you interested and there are laughs aplenty. A passionate love story with witty banter throughout, this is great fun and one not to miss. **Emily Govan**