

# HAVING A BALL

**Marianka Swain** enjoyed a high-spirited but unrefined *Damn Yankees* revival at the Landor Theatre on October 7



**T**his uplifting tale of the little team that could finds a natural home in Clapham's intimate venue, even if its buoyant, youthful cast threatens to burst through the walls during Robbie O'Reilly's action-packed ensemble numbers. Adler and Ross's 1955 musical is a swing and a miss story-wise – its simplistic retelling of the Faust legend via an underdog baseball team has plot holes large enough to drive a tank through, and the media satire is tame by today's standards – but its

dulcet score offers a pleasant base for jazz hands and sonorous sentiment.

Robert McWhir's production is undeniably rough around the edges, with dropped cues, erratic lighting and actors demonstrating varying grasp of tune, rhythm and American accent, but, in the words of Washington Senators coach Benny Van Buren (Tony Stansfield), "You've gotta have heart", and that they do.

Gary Bland and Alex Lodge form an appealing centre as "Shoeless" Joe,

the middle-aged superfan transformed into 22-year-old star player via a devilish deal. Lodge is a handsome, guileless lead with sweet tone, though strained top notes, and gains depth when performing opposite gently melancholic Nova Skipp as abandoned wife Meg and standout Stansfield, whose deft timing, resonant voice and nifty moves put him in a different league.

McWhir struggles to set a consistent tone, with Jonathan D Ellis having a little too much panto fun as Mephistophelian Mr Applegate, winking broadly throughout, while Poppy Tierney strikes out with Gwen Verdon's comic gem Lola. Tierney

clumsily plays the vamp rather than lampooning it, and visibly struggles with Vaudevillian mambo romp "Who's Got the Pain?" – made to look deceptively simple by Verdon and husband Fosse in the 1958 film version.

While more concerned with stamina than style, O'Reilly does channel Fosse in pushing his dancers to the limit, though their effort is often too apparent (particularly in a series of disastrous pirouettes). Nevertheless, there's a lively array of tumbling, tricks and high kicks, and the cast's willingness to step up to the plate suits this artless fable in which professional glory cannot compete with the joy of community. ●



Poppy Tierney and Alex Lodge in *Damn Yankees*