

Theatre: The Critics



■ Asking Rembrandt. Picture: Chris Gardner

A poorly painted picture of artist's life

ASKING REMBRANDT
OLD RED LION
★★★★☆

Carving a slice of drama out of a little documented chapter in the life of a famous figure is a tricky proposition.

It is not a hurdle which writer Steve Gooch manages to convincingly overcome in Asking Rembrandt.

Presented as a profane, bawdy genius, the titanic Dutch painter (played by Liam McKenna) paces his abode with both a sense of righteous self-confidence and an insecurity that marks a deteriorating financial state.

His love life is in the throes of change.

Rembrandt has survived his wife's passing, but his new relationship with former

maid, the much younger Henni (Esme Patey-Ford), is widely condemned due to the swollen, pregnant belly that she is developing outside of wedlock.

This damning societal attitude is no passive threat. Remarriage would close the door on Rembrandt accessing his son Titus' (Loz Keystone) trust saved under his deceased wife's will.

In and amongst this dilemma, he is visited by his patron, Jan Six (John Gorick), who ensures that the familiar art/commerce squabbles flow with typical incongruence.

While there are fleeting flashes of intrigue, and intermittent moments of potency, this is, more often than not, an inconsistent and incoherent work.

The analysis between artist

and patron was much better observed by Jeremy Green in his outstanding Lizzie Siddal performed at the Arcola in 2013.

The vulgarity of the remarks spewing from Rembrandt's mouth do not prompt laughs nor are they an effective transposition of a 17th century potty mouth, to demark an archetypal working class vernacular.

One of the production's few successes lies in a neat staging by Alex Marker, where a broken frame envelops the space and creates a pleasingly artsy proscenium arch.

For all of its potential, hinted at in an all-too-brief discussion about the truth to be found in portraiture, Gooch's brush strokes paint his subject poorly.
Greg Wetherall



■ The Seagull. Picture: Johan Persson

Chekhov update holds up mirror to nature

THE SEAGULL
REGENT'S PARK
★★★★☆

Art imitates life in Chekhov's tale of parasitic creatives, and on opening night in Regent's Park, the reverse also came to pass when a resident moorhen waddled over to greet the dead seagull.

It's a compliment to Matthew Dunster, who fully embeds the Russian tale in our north London park, while Torben Betts's sparky free adaptation gives the 120-year-old work an effortlessly contemporary feel.

Jon Bausor's striking design is dominated by a giant angled mirror, highlighting the prevailing narcissism. Fading diva Arkadina and her clan use love to inflate their egos, seeing the preferred

Unemotional Kafka is a trial

THE TRIAL
YOUNG VIC
★★★★☆

Judgement is inescapable in Richard Jones's punishing version of Kafka's novel. Miriam Buether's striking design makes the audience a voyeuristic jury, ranged on benches in the queasily lit courtroom, with the accused toiling before us on a rolling travelator. It's an intriguing representation of this existentialist abyss – the hopeless fight against unstoppable forces – but interest wanes over a relentless yet oddly unmoving two hours.

On his 35th birthday, Josef K (Rory Kinnear) awakes to a living nightmare: agents invade his home and threaten him with arrest, but refuse to disclose his crime – that's the purview of the mysterious court. K is plunged into a hell of labyrinthine bureaucracy and increasing humiliation and alienation.

Nick Gill's adaptation creates a comprehensible dramatic shape out of Kafka's fragments and astutely explores the slippery language of oppression, from "Everything belongs to the court" to the literal deconstruction of

innocence: "e-no-sense". However, potentially incisive commentary on the surveillance state and dubious anti-terrorism measures – K considers inventing a confession in the hope "it all goes away" – is limited by Gill's sexual focus. K's self-loathing stems from adolescent hormonal stirrings, and every woman is an object of guilty lust. It reduces a political classic to Freudian conjecture.

Kinnear is compelling as the bullish banker reduced to a desperate, sweating wreck, and lends conviction to the Joycean baby speak Gill employs as K's inner voice. Kate O'Flynn is sensational in numerous parts, including an alarmingly persistent schoolgirl, and there's good support from Hugh Skinner's dehumanised supplicant and Sian Thomas's smooth-talking lawyer.

David Saver and Alex Twisleton's soundscape, featuring harsh organ music, jangling typewriter keys and a mocking laugh track, adds to the distorted reality. But Jones's focus on stylish surrealism prevents this production from being either powerfully sinister or truly moving.

Marianka Swain



■ Sian Thomas and Hugh Skinner in The Trial picture: Keith Pattison

version of themselves reflected in those who adore them.

Any threats to self-image must be extinguished, hence Arkadina callously crushing her aspiring playwright son Konstantin because his new type of theatre renders her irrelevant.

Janie Dee delivers a memorably toxic creation, absurdly flexing her lithe limbs in a show of girlishness, skilfully posing and manipulating her lover instead of being a caring mother.

She no longer recognises the distinction between reality and artifice.

Nor does Konstantin, preaching the theatre of truth but only able to produce tortured symbolic indulgence.

In contrast, Dunster's production is overly broad at

times, with explicit editorialising via eye-rolling servants, but it comes closer to following Hamlet's instruction to hold "the mirror up to nature" – figuratively as well as literally. It's an effective interpretation of Chekhov's most overt homage to the Bard.

Matthew Tennyson's frail, oversensitive Konstantin impresses, as do Alex Robertson's egotistical writer, Ian Redford's florid uncle, Lisa Diveney's seething alcoholic, Sabrina Bartlett's impulsive actress, Colin Hoult's ignored teacher and Danny Webb's pensive doctor.

This is Chekhov with real 21st-century bite, attacking the hollowness and corrosiveness of celebrity. Another bold offering in a strong Open Air season.

Marianka Swain