

BE OUR GUEST

Marianka Swain checked into *Grand Hotel* at Southwark Playhouse on August 10

“I want to be alone,” Greta Garbo famously announced in the Oscar-winning film adaptation of Vicki Baum’s *Menschen im Hotel*, set in 1928 Berlin. The portmanteau novel has had a bumpier road to stage success, with Luther Davis, Robert Wright and George Forrest’s 1950s musical folding, and a revamped version – with input from composer Maury Yeston and director/choreographer Tommy Tune – scoring on Broadway in 1989, but flopping in the West End.

Baum’s multiple-strand, surface-level narrative remains challenging dramatically, but is persuasively showcased in Thom Southerland’s energetic 105-minute chamber piece,

which packs a cast of 17 into a tight traverse staging. Choreographer Lee Proud works miracles in this limiting space, notably with his perfectly drilled upstairs/downstairs introduction to staff and residents of the bustling deluxe hotel.

Our guide to this procession of down-and-outs is a morphine-addicted doctor, who offers a welcome emotional connection to the dizzying array of characters – as well as accentuating our voyeuristic view. Proud’s constantly fluid movement smooths the transitions between the strangers’ fragmented tales and arrestingly illustrates the way in which some begin to impact on one another.

The stories – of which we are only afforded brief glimpses – tend towards cliché, so it’s to the credit of a skilled company that several resonate. Particularly strong are George Rae’s dying Jewish bookkeeper, who yearns for the high life; Christine Grimandi’s fading prima ballerina and Scott Garnham as her bankrupt baron lover – beautifully pitched, if lacking chemistry; James Gant’s tyrannical hotel manager; Jonathan Stewart’s put-upon desk clerk; and honey-voiced Victoria Serra’s typist dreaming of Hollywood stardom.

The Weimar setting, jazzy score and familiar themes like thirst for money and power, looming

mortality and the clash between reality and narcissistic fantasy place *Grand Hotel* in the shadow of the more focused – and hummable – *Cabaret*. But Southerland effectively evokes pre-Nazi self-delusion, juxtaposing hedonism and desolation, though the misguided blunt ending undoes the understated earlier work.

The seven-piece band robustly performs Simon Lee’s crisp new orchestrations, designer Lee Newby conjures opulence with minimal fuss, and Proud’s elegant, layered numbers – from frenetic Charlestons to romantic waltzes – are full of purpose. A flawed piece, but first-class service. ●



Victoria Serra
in *Grand Hotel*