

Theatre: The Critics

A whimsical vehicle for star Mark Rylance

**FARINELLI AND THE KING
DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE**
★★★★☆

Make opera, not war. So urges composer-turned-playwright Claire van Kampen's featherweight historical star vehicle, elevated by husband Mark Rylance – in a tailored role showcasing his beguiling idiosyncrasies – and John Dove's sumptuous production.

Rylance is 18th-century Philippe V of Spain, whose reign is threatened by rumblings of war, an abdication plot, and his descent into debilitating depression. But wife Isabella hopes celebrated castrato Farinelli might restore the king's spirits and sanity.

Though inspired by real events, van Kampen's whimsical piece offers a reductive view of music therapy as magic cure for bipolar Philippe. More interesting, though bluntly spelled out, is the parallel between the "unnaturally" created sovereign and singer (whose ambitious brother butchered his genitals). Trapped by the greatness thrust upon them, the pair escape their fishbowl – yes, there's also a literal fishbowl – and return to nature.

The play's fascination with oppositions – public and private, court and forest, power and helplessness, agony and ecstasy – makes a virtue of Farinelli's dissociative portrayal, with Sam Crane the mournful man and counter-tenor Iestyn Davies his divine voice. Davies' hypnotic arias communicate more effectively than words the soul-stirring power of music. Truly "art for all", though that exhortation lands more ironically in the pricey West End than at the Globe.

Rylance's mercurial monarch is at once petulant, threatening,



■ Mark Rylance as Philippe V of Spain. Picture: Simon Annand

listless and giddily impulsive, tormenting Melody Grove's steadfast carer Isabella. However, there's richer exploration of that dynamic up the road in *The Father*; here, it swerves into romantic melodrama. The intersection of medicine and faith is thinly sketched, as are most supporting

characters, though Colin Hurley's grumpy librettist amuses.

If not deeply illuminating, it is exquisitely candlelit, casting flickering shadows over Jonathan Frensom's brocade frock coats and oppressive regal portraits. Lavish but limited.

Marianka Swain

A schmaltzy but sizzling hit

**IN THE HEIGHTS
KING'S CROSS THEATRE**
★★★★☆

King's Cross, our latest "new city quarter", is an apt setting for this 2008 Tony Award winner, which focuses on New York's Dominican-dominated Washington Heights. The local immigrant population values their close-knit community, but gentrification threatens: as rents rise, the hipsters invade, and businesses and residents are priced out.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* is a current Broadway sensation, and this earlier piece shows why. His score is a propulsive, richly textured fusion of hip-hop, rap, pop and Latin: musical theatre for the 21st century. *West Side Story* casts a long shadow, however, and Quiara Alegria Hudes' book can't compete, reducing hardship to Disney fable. There's no drugs or serious crime, and all problems are solved by a group hug and fortuitous lottery win – a dreamy version of the American Dream. But Miranda's innovative numbers thoughtfully address multicultural identity: how do you define who you are when you're

not sure where is home.

Luke Sheppard's Southwark Playhouse production is cleverly reconfigured for King's Cross (played in rep with *The Railway Children*). The sound balance is better, the traverse staging immersive, and Drew McOnie's pulsating choreography remains a big sell. Athletic aerials, racy club salsa, expressive contemporary and silky-smooth partnering grow organically out of the storytelling, while maintaining a freewheeling urban vibe.

Sam Mackay's bodega-owner Usnavi is a charismatic guide, while Lily Frazer and Joe Aaron Reid's star-crossed lovers – one running from Stanford, the other seeking acceptance – provide soulful singing and unaffected performances. David Bedella brings gravitas as her conflicted father, ex-Sugababe Jade Ewen offers a strong presence if strained vocals, and Cleve September has smooth moves. But two strong, sensual women dominate: Josie Benson and Victoria Hamilton-Barritt, the latter astonishingly five months pregnant. Schmaltzy, yes, but an irresistible sizzling hit.

Marianka Swain



■ Antoine Murray-Straughan as Graffiti Pete. Picture: Johan Persson

Chorus' Mozart masterclass with children's choirs singing of infant cannibalism

The sublime (but incomplete) Mass in C Minor was the opener to the Crouch End Festival Chorus' latest Barbican concert.

A monumental piece, when listened to in conjunction with Stephen Barber's terrifically helpful programme notes, it became a master-class in understanding Mozart's musical influences.

The opening Kyrie gave an opportunity to Grace Davidson, the first of four soloists, to show off her magnificent crystal soprano against the powerful and dynamic background of the chorus who, unusually, seemed slightly off their game, taking a while to get going.

Perhaps working with a new orchestra (the excellent London Mozart Players) had wrong-footed them. But by the *Qui Tollis* they were back on track. Scored for a double chorus in eight parts it is in part robustly loud with other sections whispered and mysterious. Conductor David Temple (pictured) was like a military general marshalling his army as he impelled each part of the choir to deliver this great work: the *Qui Sede* was simply awesome.

Britten's *Saint Nicolas* followed the interval but first there was hymn practice: the audience would be joining

in with the children's choirs from Finchley, St Michael's Catholic Grammar School and Rhodes



Avenue Primary.

St Nicholas is an unusual piece – oratorio-like with ample opportunity for performance by amateur and school choirs – telling the story of the fourth century man who became Santa. Like so many of these stories it is not without its fantastic and gruesome elements. Part the Seventh is entitled *Nicholas and the Pickled Boys* and takes for its central

theme infantile cannibalism.

Hats off to the three young lads who processed through the auditorium as Ed Lyon's impassioned tenor, St Nick himself, impelled them to "... put your fleshy garments on!" Back on would have been more accurate.

The children were terrific: attentive, confident and nuanced. Credit must also go to their teachers and conductors on the night for producing a warm and professional sound that was hugely enjoyed by parents and friends; an ingenious and successful way to get a fresh breed of music lovers into the concert hall.

David Winskill