

Theatre: The Critics



■ Paul Rhys and Jessica Brown Findlay picture: Manuel Harlan

Modern passion in a revitalised Chekhov

UNCLE VANYA
ALMEIDA
★★★★☆

After putting a modern spin on the Oresteia, with memorable results, director Robert Icke takes on another classic. No samovars here: Icke has stripped back, anglicised and revitalised Chekhov, obliterating the space between story and spectator. His zoomed-in vision offers rich, intimate psychology, but it's also naturalism bereft of context – present-day rural England as murky substitute for the remote 19th-century Russian province facing seismic change.

Yet this is otherwise a beautifully detailed, immersive world, unspooling over a quietly mesmeric three-plus hours. Icke masterfully

conveys the steady march of time, the inexorable futility of these unfulfilled lives. The farmer's wasted years of unappreciated toil; the ageing professor failing to achieve immortality through second-rate work; the doctor's losing battle against environmental destruction; and the romantic longing never to be sated. Vivid releases; rocking out to Iggy Pop and Bowie; pummelling a bouquet of flowers, burn bright, but are swiftly snuffed out.

Icke's effective fragmentary adaptation is composed of lyrical, darkly funny failed communications. When the yearning for understanding grows too great, the actors jump off the stage to deliver naked confessionals directly to us. Paul Rhys as the tragic title character is drained, pained and genuinely

dangerous, while the white-hot erotic encounter that shatters the stasis of Vanessa Kirby's complex golden girl and Tobias Menzies' comfortably numb doctor lingers agonisingly. Jessica Brown

Findlay's outwardly tough Sonya lays herself open with exquisite hopefulness; Hilton McRae's professor is coolly vampiric; Richard Lumsden offers a resonant running gag, constantly pausing his guitar playing to retune; and Ann Queensberry's nurturing Nanny highlights the family's arrested development. Hildegard Bechtler's revolving set honours different perspectives, but also creates major sightline issues. It's an unnecessary addition to a version that finds resounding contemporary passion in a timeless tale of inaction.

Marianka Swain

Less bite but still shattering

RE:HOME
YARD THEATRE HACKNEY
★★★★☆

In 2006 Cressida Brown staged 'Home', a promenade performance set in the notorious high-rise Beaumont Estate Towers in Leyton, prior to its demolition. The play was inspired by interviews with local residents. In Re:Home Brown revisits the Beaumont 'base' to track down what happened to the people she interviewed. In its place, Brown finds a low-rise layout, box-ticking green spaces and a maze of hoop-jumping internal security - an example of a council's attempt at social engineering. It's significant that this production is not staged on-site but at the local Yard Theatre. Like the Beaumont new build, some bite has gone and the production tries too hard to entertain.

Using hand-held camera footage from the original play, Re:Home is structured around the real-life stories of

11-year olds who were interviewed in 2005. We hear Brown off-camera and the cast of four present her words, heedless of gender and ethnic divides. Projections flash up statistics: out of the 4490 original residents, only 239 remain. Rumbling urban sounds bolster a sense of menace. While the council's policy of not offering new homes in rebuilt Beaumont to original residents is deeply troubling, the loaded mood is misleading: it's not the unearthing of some shattering mystery. The talented cast morph into multiple residents from pensioners to wardens to teenage crews. The warmth that residents felt for the former community life is palpable. Verbatim lines are full of wit and wisdom. Some of the original interviewees did well - Darren became a youth worker - but others can't resist returning to the roots that formed their identity.

When the telling moves away from a preoccupation with its own creative process to the heartbreaking human story of Frankie - a particularly happy child - who is murdered as a teenager, the issues are shattering in their simplicity.

Caroline David



Picture: Mark Douet



Picture: Kasia Burke

Explicit but vital look at Grindr generation

5 GUYS CHILLIN'
THE KING'S HEAD, ISLINGTON
★★★★☆

It is 36 years since the furore that greeted Howard Brenton's The Romans in Britain. The action included a male rape scene that sent Mary Whitehouse and her legions into fits of outrage.

While it's unlikely 5 Guys Chillin' will evoke such a response, the sheer shock value of the most extreme dialogue and action I've seen on stage is not for the faint hearted.

Peter Darney's play is about five men relaxing before a chemsex party. Having taken a few lines of cocaine, it is not long before

togs are off and five magnificent physiques spend the next 75 minutes bobbing around in posing pouches and baggy vests.

Darney deploys the verbatim style to explore the anonymous and often sordid world inhabited by many young gay men. Fifty hours of interviews with men on Grindr have been condensed and given to five brilliantly crafted characters with diverse backgrounds and motivations.

The terrifically sharp and witty script presents the mores, morals and etiquette of often violent sex with strangers, sharing direct experiences and introducing members of the audience to some extreme practices through words and simulation.

We are left feeling the men involved in this dark world are there not because they want to be but because they can be. One says that before drugs it was possible to have relationships - but not now.

This world has been enabled by the availability of a sophisticated drugs market and an NHS that is unquestioningly there to treat the rashes, discharges and palpitations when they inevitably arrive.

This brilliant play is an acknowledgement not just of the dangers to the men themselves but also of the massive public health challenge from the rise of STDs.

Don't go if you like safe theatre. Book now if you want to find out just how liberal minded you are.

David Winskill