

WHAT'S ON

REVIEW

Solitary, bewildered and reviled, Lewis compels

THE GOAT OR WHO IS SYLVIA?
THEATRE ROYAL HAYMARKET

★★★★☆

If we needed further evidence that Damian Lewis is one of his generation's best actors, here it is. As compelling on stage as on screen, he delivers Edward Albee's tightly penned dialogue about a man who falls in love with a goat, with utter conviction and deft comic timing.

Cast as 50-year-old Martin, a successful architect with a brief to design a gleaming city from the Iowa cornfields, the Tufnell Park actor is comfortable embracing this nerdy bespectacled verbally nit-picking liberal whose midlife crisis casts him beyond the social pale.

Sophie Okonedo as wounded and furious wife Stevie is more than a fair match for Lewis' charisma. If his American accent is understandably pitch perfect, hers never slips as she rattles out Stevie's bitter swipes and commands the stage, smashing up Rae Smith's art-filled city apartment and confronting him with her primal pain.

When she promises: "You have broken me and I will break you," you damn well believe it.

Jason Hughes provides reliable support as hypocritical best friend Ross, appalled at Martin's taboo-busting passion, while accepting routine marital infidelity.

Only the couple's gay teen son Billy shows a glimmer of understanding about the arbitrary boundaries of sexual norms – although Archie Madekwe's gangly adolescent is the weakest of the quartet in Ian Rickson's



■ The Goat or Who is Sylvia?

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

empassioned revival of Albee's tragicomedy which was first staged at The Almeida in 2004.

It's nigh on two hours of break-free entrenched family warfare in a single setting, but thanks to stellar performances and Albee's masterful

rat a tat dialogue your attention never flags. Despite its absurdity, Lewis' solitary, bewildered, and reviled Martin trying to explain the "epiphany" of his love will have you totally hooked.

Susanna Joy

REVIEW

Darkly comic and provocative

CONSENT
NATIONAL THEATRE
★★★★☆

Nina Raine, who tackled the NHS in Tiger Country, now turns her penetrating gaze on the legal system. Edward and Tim are barristers on opposite sides of a rape case, but the real battleground is at home: wife and new mother Kitty fears Edward's legal logic has entirely sapped his empathy.

Raine is astute on the system's eccentricities, from rhetorical tricks to the seeming unfairness of dispassionate justice. Gayle (Heather Craney in a wrenching performance), who was raped after her sister's funeral, wants understanding, but Tim's more concerned with her sharing inadmissible details that weren't in her original police statement. Edward's chilly cross-examination feels downright inhuman.

The barristers' ability to construct competing versions of the truth bleeds into their relationships. Jake (a wickedly funny Adam James) justifies his serial philandering by arguing that agreeing to marry someone means "consenting" to their

flaws, while Edward refuses to apologise for an historic affair because "I'm sorry" is an admission of guilt.

The dense plotting is rather schematic, and Raine tends to overstate her arguments. The addition of actress friend Zara studying Greek tragedy, thus inviting discussion of infidelity, vengeance and using children to wound a spouse, is too explicit; in a world trading on ambiguity, the play could do with more. It's also a firmly privileged milieu, with working-class Gayle a thematic prop.

But there are superb performances from Anna Maxwell Martin as the troubled Kitty and Ben Chaplin as reptilian, rational Edward, plus great support from Priyanga Burford, Pip Carter and Daisy Haggard. Roger Michell's slick production features a fluid set from Hildegard Bechtler, including an array of lights: a reminder of the couple's symbolic counter-weighted lamp. Incendiary, darkly comic, and sure to provoke arguments in the bar afterwards.

Marianka Swain



■ Consent, at the National Theatre.

Picture: SARAH M LEE

REVIEW

Gags, but little power in this trenches tale

THE WIPERS TIMES
ARTS THEATRE

★★★★☆

Ian Hislop and Nick Newman's extraordinary true story of how a satirical magazine was produced in the trenches of WW1 has already been a BBC TV film. Now a stage show re-treads the same ground, celebrating the power of humour to relieve the tedium and terror of war for the British Tommy.

Caroline Leslie's deft production is framed by the post-war efforts of former Captain Fred Roberts to get work as a Fleet Street journalist based solely on his time as editor of The Wipers' Times (named after the British mangling of the Belgian town Ypres). Reminding us of the tragedy of mass unemploy-

ment for many of those who served, it flashes back to 1916 and the camaraderie between James Dutton's Roberts and sub-editor Jack Pearson (George Kemp) with a flurry of gags, parodies, and music hall style songs culled from the original paper.

Many of the jokes and skits are at the expense of superiors often far behind the frontline. Naturally staff officers view the efforts of our plucky hacks as 'an incitement to mutiny' and try unsuccessfully to shut it down. In reality the paper was probably a useful pressure valve and spirit stiffener for the ordinary soldier against the extremes of war.

Some of these old gags now feel hackneyed but might have been

more poignant if contextualised by a backdrop of the real dangers they faced.

But Leslie keeps things light and hearty, and although the story retains its fascination it suffers by comparison with Joan Littlewood's politically punchier Oh What A Lovely War.

A young ensemble cast manage well with often underdeveloped characters – fleshing out the resourceful Sergeant who obtained not one but three printing presses whilst ducking German Artillery seemed an opportunity missed. All this makes the two hour running time feel a little long for a production that never quite achieves its potential power.

Andrew Geehan



■ The Wipers Times.

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR