

Theatre

Private Lives

Gielgud Theatre, London
 July 23-September 21
 Author: Noel Coward
 Director: Jonathan Kent
 Producer: Chichester Festival Theatre
 Cast: Anna Chancellor, Toby Stephens,
 Anthony Calf, Sue Kelvin, Anna-Louise
 Plowman
 Running time: 2hrs

Noel Coward's 1930 comedy sweeps into the West End on a wave of love for Jonathan Kent's fresh and zesty Chichester revival from last autumn – and you can see why.

The play Coward dismissed as "the lightest of light comedies" is imbued with all the joie de vivre and comic brio you would want and expect but without losing a sense of the pain at the heart of this separated couple who meet again on honeymoon with other partners five years after parting.

As Elyot and Amanda, Toby Stephens and Anna Chancellor can stand happily alongside the many greats who have taken on these roles including Robert Stephens, Richard Burton and Maggie Smith.

Stephens has all the shallow insouciance expected of the role, goofily entitled but somehow always alert to the stirrings of his blackened, hyper-privileged heart. He even flicks his ash with the right level of disdain. Chancellor, for me the star of this production, is similarly knowing but her impeccably skilful timing also extracts every ounce of comic gusto from her lines. One longs for their moments together. But while this has all the sexual energy between the warring partners we need, a good production of this play also requires a believable set of rejected partners. And Antony Calf brings to his Victor Prynne all the worthy decency Amanda was so keen to reject and Anna-Louise Plowman's Sybil turns beautifully from blissful ignorance to bratty fury.

Anthony Ward's designs complement proceedings, especially his recreation of Amanda's 1930s Parisian flat, complete with the latest art work. It's spouse-throttlingly good entertainment with just the right dash of nuance.

Ben Dowell

The Moment of Truth

Southwark Playhouse, London
 June 28-July 20
 Author: Peter Ustinov
 Director: Robert Laycock
 Producer: The New Actors Company
 Cast includes: Rodney Bewes, Miles
 Richardson, Bonnie Wright, Mark Carey,
 Callum Coates, Toni Kanal
 Running time: 2hrs 15mins

Written just after the Second World War, inspired by the trials of Vichy leaders and Nazi collaborators Marshal Petain and Pierre Laval, this play questions the nature of reportage at a time of war.

Using elements of King Lear



Mark Carey, Miles Richardson, Rodney Bewes and Callum Coates in *The Moment of Truth* at Southwark Playhouse, London

and an amalgam of theatrical styles, author Peter Ustinov attempts to uncover the nature of propaganda and how easily the manipulation of the media can sway a nation's conscience.

Central to the plot is the Marshal (Rodney Bewes), a decorated war veteran idolised by his countrymen but now on the verge of dementia. Political plea-bargaining anoints him head of state to instil confidence in the new order, but inevitably the house of cards collapses.

The New Actors Company and director Robert Laycock deserve to be complimented on the revival of this absorbing political satire that remains as pertinent today as it did when first performed in the middle of the last century.

The trio of Miles Richardson as the Prime Minister, Mark Carey as the Foreign Minister and Callum Coates as General in the initial war cabinet capture the downright absurdity of modern politics, in a style not a million light years away from *Yes Minister*.

Quite different in style, and causing problems with the structure of the play as a whole, is the story of the Marshal and his daughter. Rodney Bewes delivers a beautifully nuanced performance as the doddering old soldier, and Bonnie Wright, in her stage debut, is perfectly acceptable as the Girl, but something is at odds here. The play alters pace dramatically, delivering its final message with much less of an impact than anticipated. References to Lear are manifest, but nothing like the tragedy of Lear has taken place.

The real strength of this production, however, is in the ensemble, making the play well worth a visit to the new, albeit temporary, Southwark venue.

Paul Vale

Spoonface Steinberg

Jermyn Street Theatre, London
 July 2-July 20
 Author: Lee Hall
 Director: Max Barton
 Producer: Jermyn Street Theatre, Citizens
 Theatre
 Cast includes: Lucy Hollis
 Running time: 1hr 10mins

Spoonface Steinberg is a little girl who likes to play with toys, listen to her walkman and dream about the future.

She's also severely autistic and dying of cancer. Lee Hall's monologue is melancholic, charming and so popular there's currently another version running in the UK – we clearly like our tragedy philosophical and playful in this country.

Except that it's not really tragic at all. Hall's skill is in turning what could be mawkish memorialising into a celebration of the human spirit. While that might sound sentimental in Max Barton's vivid, sharp production it's not.

Carmen Mueck's cheerful, crayon coloured set and Scott Twynholm's precise,

multi-layered sound design help create Spoonface's exaggerated world, enabling us to feel the strange acuteness of her experience in all its pain and wonder.

It's a gem of a part and Lucy Hollis does a lovely job. One moment she's a livewire, bounding around the stage with her mind fizzing and eyes popping. Then she's as thin as a rake and wasting away, before her eyes begin to sparkle again.

The tempo of her language is at points garbled and at others stretched as she determinedly disavows usual manners of speech. But she's always understandable, opening up the door to Spoonface's lonely, astonishing world with real empathy.

Honour Bayes



Anna Chancellor and Toby Stephens in *Private Lives* at the Gielgud Theatre, London

THE STAGE CASTINGS

play your part



Sarah Berger

Sarah Berger has been an actor, director and producer for more than 30 years.

She set up the So and So Club to encourage industry initiative, collaboration and to build a sense of an artistic community. The aim is to pool the talent and resources of the industry through networking and club events to offer support, open doors, and create possibilities.

An annual subscription of £30 gives members access to all club events, a profile on the website (www.thesoandsoartsclub.com), industry concessions, as well as posting your requests on the club page.

Since its launch on July 1, 2012, the club boasts more than 1,200 members, has

Q&A with Sarah Berger

What has been your biggest obstacle in founding and running the club?

The amount of work required to keep the momentum of something new and unfinanced going. It has meant turning down paid work as an actress, as I realised that if I did not dedicate sufficient time and energy to nurturing the club, it would be another good idea that fizzles out. The way in which it has taken off, and people's generosity and commitment to it have been staggering. This leads me to believe that the club is providing something badly needed in today's industry.

Are you looking to expand the club internationally?

Yes, I am looking to expand abroad and have members in America, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Turkey and Singapore. I am taking a club production to the New York International Fringe Festival in August, followed by a visit to San Francisco to talk about setting up links with the artistic community there.

What kind of support would be most helpful for you?

To join in and get involved with ongoing projects such as the rehearsed reading programme at Samuel French's. The whole ethos is to share connections, experiences and to create a sense of

given paid work to more than 50 members and showcased the work of more than 100 creatives. Its newest venture is A Kick up the Arts – a week long festival from July 22 offering masterclasses, showcases and comprehensive networking opportunities at industry-friendly rates. Every day features a different aspect of the arts, culminating with a wrap party at London's Groucho Club.

The Stage will be presenting our new online service, The Stage Castings, as part of Production Day on July 25, when Castings business development manager Jennifer Reischel will speak about using the service to request and submit video auditions.

Performers can sign up to The Stage Castings at www.thestage.co.uk/castings. If you would like to cast your project with the service, please contact Jennifer on 020 7939 8489 or email jennifer@thestage.co.uk. Book tickets for the festival at www.soandsoevents.wix.com/kickupthearts



community, so that people don't feel isolated and have others to consult who will offer support. The club is also a great platform to generate paid work – the more industry people such as agents, casting directors, directors and producers join our projects, the more we can achieve.

What are your plans?

To continue to help develop new work and to establish an ongoing mentoring presence. We are also looking to find a base where we can offer cut-price rehearsal space. The website is being developed and eventually we will have a smart phone app for club postings – and we plan to develop 'The £7 Club' – a platform for theatre companies to offer £7 tickets for new productions. We are continuing to develop the Women in Arts aspect of the club, including a three-day festival in collaboration with the Actors Centre, following on from the highly successful forum we held at the St James Theatre earlier this year.

How has the club affected your own career?

I have had the enormous satisfaction of using my long career to make something happen. In many ways it is the most creative thing I have ever done. I love being proactive and encouraging others and our events have been attended by over 500 people – it doesn't get much better than that.