

## Review: Shakespeare in Love

### Shakespeare in Love Bath Theatre Royal

**There are some stories I adore so much that you could do nearly anything to them and I will still enjoy myself. Shakespeare in Love is not among these.**

Approaching the production currently on stage at the Theatre Royal, Bath it could have gone either way. Add to this that I had dragged a friend quite out of her way to see it, the well-versed cast were not going to be given an easy ride.

There was an excruciating moment when the opening skit dragged on too long in front of a silent audience. I can only imagine how much worse it must feel on stage trying to break the ice.

But to my great relief we didn't have to wait too long for the laughs to start rolling in and from there the pace built up to a rollicking ride that left you feeling buoyant and wanting more.

I enjoyed the good mix of slapstick humour alongside the more witty word play you would expect from a Shakespeare-esque play.

The full talents of the cast were put to good use with the creative transformation of a small set, on stage playing of instruments, splendid choruses and even an Irish jig!

No member of the cast let the team down. But Pierro Niel-Mee made a particularly convincing struggling playwright, while Bill



Ward as Lord Wessex, the unwanted suitor, was every part the villain. And although Judi Dench is an impossible act to follow, Geraldine Alexander gave it a darn good go as Queen Elizabeth.

Following in the footsteps of a much-loved film puts pressure on a performance, but I can honestly say this adaptation by Lee Hall added a new dimension and would be enjoyed by both those who have or haven't seen the movie.

Although there are some more serious moments in the play, the story the producers were working with was never going to be particularly profound. But if you're looking for the perfect antidote for a bad day at work, you can't go past it.

Expect to have a jolly good time and to be kept on your toes – a cast

member may just pop up beside you.

As for the Theatre Royal – it is a joy in itself. The old world grandeur of the theatre belies its modest size. It is particularly cosy and comforting from the moment you enter.

During your visit, climb down into The Vaults. Sadly I didn't have the chance to sample the food menu, but it was a wonderfully ambient place to enjoy a drink, with muted lighting under exposed stone arches.

■ Shakespeare in Love runs at the Theatre Royal, Bath, until Saturday with evening and matinee performances. Prices from £22, visit [theatreroyal.org.uk](http://theatreroyal.org.uk)

By Elise Britten



Pierro Niel-Mee as Will Shakespeare and Imogen Daines as Viola de Lesseps and left, Will Shakespeare (seated) with the company  
Picture: Pete Le May

## Review: Tusk Tusk

### Tusk Tusk The Mission Theatre September 28&29

A single room. Three young actors. A birthday party. A dead rat. A dark secret. Tusk Tusk, a contemporary play by Polly Stenham, performed at The Mission Theatre by Bath Acting and Theatre Studio (BATS) was hilarious and heart-breaking in turns, a modern 'comedy of menace' – Pinter meets Tracy Beaker via the dark world of Fairy Tales – with tour-de force performances by young principals who gripped the audience until the final devastating conclusion.

It opens with a scene of typical sibling bickering – 'You're a girl ... your flies are undone ... you look like Margaret Thatcher!' – quick fire exchanges of insults, verbal warfare on a teenage scale. But right from the outset there is an unsettling sense that all is not as it seems. These kids are too self-sufficient, too good at 'parenting' their little brother, too anxious about the phone that never rings. The exchanges are funny – sometimes achingly so – but there's a brittle resilience to Lollie McKenzie's Maggie, which fractures occasionally to expose fault lines of deep-seated vulnerability. And her elder brother, Ollie Cochran's volatile Eliot, uses humour, word play and a thinly veiled undercurrent of violence to deflect from his abandonment issues.

Absent parents are a timeless and timely theme, and there are faint but distinct echoes of the plots of children's books running through this play. This is middle class neglect, they both long for and loathe their manic depressive alcoholic mother, whose perfume lulls them to sleep and fends off the nightmares that circle in her absence.

Gradually the outside world encroaches – first there's the girlfriend, Cassie, played with moving stillness, subtlety and insight by Ebony Hammond, who is briefly let in to bear witness to the spiralling madness. She sees the elder siblings cradling the youngest as blood pours from his head and hears them conclude with devastating logic that there is no one they can turn to for help.

Then in the final scene 'help' appears in the dubious form of family friends, Katie and Roland (Katie Goldsmith and Steve Huggins) with their polished veneer of respectability and comic banality. But hopes of 'happy ever after' are swiftly punctured by the revelations that come thick and fast, devastating the marriage, fragmenting the family, leaving them with an impossible choice to make.

This play is heart-breaking to watch but there are moments of laugh-out-loud humour, even in the darkest moments.

But it is the performances of the young actors that make this play



Roland (Steve Huggins), Eliot (Ollie Cochran), Katie (Katie Goldsmith) and Maggie (Lollie McKenzie) in Tusk Tusk

truly memorable. Danny McKenzie is supremely moving as Finn, the little brother who everyone is desperately seeking to protect.

And the relationship between the two central characters is utterly mesmerising. The blurred lines of brother-sister-mother-son-friend-enemy are played on with disconcerting intensity, as the play slowly unpeels the layers of back story redolent of abandonment, addiction, longing and loss. Fourteen-year-old Lollie McKenzie, who starred as Matilda in the West End,

comes of age in this production, proving herself an actress of stunning maturity, particularly as she delivers her devastating final monologue. And Ollie Cochran – also just 14 – brings breath-taking versatility and a mercurial intensity to his portrayal of the volatile Eliot, who is vile and abusive at times but somehow impossible to hate. Together, their performances pack an emotional punch that leave the audience breathless – no, bruised.

The play was the culmination of a weeklong festival of work by Bath

Acting and Theatre Studio at The Mission, which included a showcase featuring no fewer than 28 young actors aged 10 to 16.

Tusk Tusk was directed with subtlety and insight by mother and daughter team Mel and Lara Lawman who managed to elicit truly exquisite performances from such a young cast. The result was hard to watch at times, but devastatingly memorable – these young stars are truly ones to watch!

By Catherine Bruton