

**LINGUA FRANK**

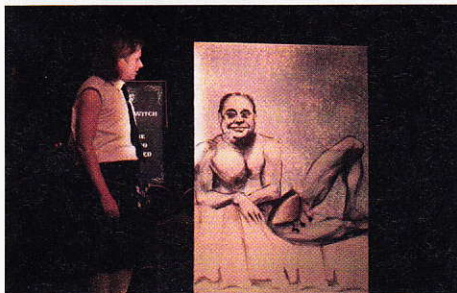
Grindingly obvious comedy ●●●●●

*Lingua Frank* is supposedly a comic play but is really a sketch show, stretched to snapping point. The scant plot revolves around bumbling English language tutor Frank (Harry Gooch), who has lost his girlfriend and is on the brink of losing his job. A script as thin as this requires some serious comic bolstering and the jokes just aren't strong enough.

The performers deliver their punchlines with gusto and their obvious comic talent is underused. Gooch resembles a ginger-haired Stephen Mangan and has a similar delivery, understated but sharp. Charlie Hindley pours his considerable energy into playing Frank's arch rival, Chest Armstrong, but even he flags as the script peters out.

The comedy revolves around silly characters rather than genuinely funny situations. Frank's colleague, Bollard (Garry Dobson), is a kilt-wearing and blazingly proud Scot. The gag is that he is also gay. Jokes such as this feel grindingly obvious, even lazy. The company valiantly hammer away at their punchlines but, more often than not, it's a swing and a miss. (Miriam Gillinson)

■ *The Playhouse on the Fringe*, 0844 871 3014, until 27 Aug, 4pm, £10 (£8).

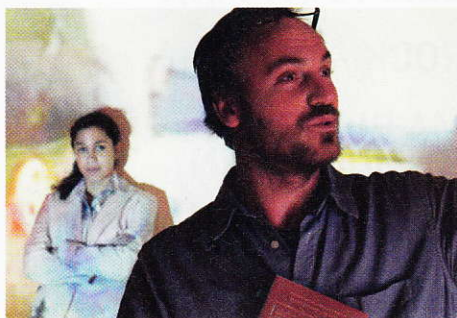
**AFTER THE RAINFALL**

Ambitious show bears repeat viewing ●●●●●

A young British diplomat makes a desperate bid to get home from Suez in the 1950s. Thirty years later, a Cumbrian art student creates a memorial to a trapped miner. An Egyptian backpacker struggles across Europe, and an ant expert releases an explosive book. Kings and queens die, empires rise and fall, and nuclear waste travels the globe in search of a resting place.

It's enough to make your head spin. And there's the undeniable feeling that *Curious Directive's After the Rainfall* might be just too dense, too packed with ideas that crash and shatter against each other throughout the course of the show. But there's no denying its ambition, and at its best the show is breathtaking – a visually spectacular, intellectually rewarding experience, with highly effective video projections, beautiful choreography and a lucid, often poetic script. Jack Lowe's direction keeps things moving fluidly, and the small cast are entirely convincing in their multiple roles. Just bear in mind that you might need to see it more than once to fully disentangle its meanings. (David Kettle)

■ *Pleasance Dome*, 556 6550, until 27 Aug, 3.40pm, £12–£13 (£10–£11).

**TURN OF THE SCREW**

Assured adaptation of iconic thriller ●●●●●

Henry James' slow-burning thriller, *Turn of the Screw*, demands an exceptionally sophisticated approach. It's a sign of HookHitch Theatre's determined ambition that they're willing to tackle this piece at the Fringe, where fast and furious often comes out on top.

The two haunted children are played by hand-carved puppets, with beady eyes and tight mouths. They seem fragile yet sinister too. These puppets are controlled by the very ghosts that haunt James' spooky country house. It's a smart twist that expresses the absolute power these spectres now possess. This is an ensemble-directed piece and the company manipulates the space well. With a few thoughtful touches, HookHitch Theatre transform a limited venue into a fluid and surprising space.

It's all very smart but just a tad rushed. Benjamin Henson's adaptation is assured but concertinaed. The acting also feels constrained. With only an hour available to build towards such extreme emotions, the performances veer towards melodrama. With just a little more time and patience, this *Screw* could dig very deep indeed. (Miriam Gillinson)

■ *Zoo Southside*, 662 6892, until 27 Aug, 12.45pm, £7 (£6).

**MARK THOMAS: BRAVO FIGARO!**

An operatic voyage around his father ●●●●●

The very least you would expect from a show about a son arranging for an opera to be performed in his dying father's living room is to be moved. And in *Bravo Figaro!*, Mark Thomas achieves that on at least two occasions, but in surprising ways and at moments you least expect it. Sure, the finale pay-off is a shoo-in, but the passages where Thomas assures us, in no uncertain terms, that this show in defiantly not a love letter to his dad and the incident where Thomas has his own eureka moment when bathing his daughter are deeply powerful.

Colin Thomas is a contradictory figure. A religious man who 'swore like a bebop artist' and a working-class builder who adored Thatcher, his appreciation of opera also came from nowhere, but developed into a passion that consumed him, to the disgruntlement of the punters he started to mingle with at Glyndebourne and Covent Garden.

When Mark worked on his dad's building sites during holidays, he got embarrassed by his father singing (and improvising) segments of Rossini or Verdi but took gleeful revenge by skipping enthusiastically off to drama school. When illness (progressive supranuclear palsy) begins to rob Thomas Snr of various strengths, he and his wife take the only remaining option left to them: they move to Bournemouth.

Like the accomplished stand-up he is, Thomas infuses his tale with constant laughs (the canal boat trip to Coventry being a highlight) and memorable details aplenty. The backdrop is an imposing photograph of Colin (known not to his face as 'Moses with a hangover'), while the stage is scattered with boxes, classical music magazines and a toy boat from which Thomas' brother delivers some salient recorded lines. The overall effect is the portrait of a family during its highs and lows, and a profound exploration of the often traumatic contradictions which make us human. (Brian Donaldson)

■ *Traverse Theatre*, 228 1404, until 26 Aug (not 20), various times, £18–£20 (£13–£15).

