

**DUBROVSKI**

Ambitious adaptation that's let down by the fundamentals ●●●●●

Sheffield-based Headlock Theatre Company have transformed Alexander Pushkin's unfinished 1832 novel *Dubrovski* into a devised stage piece that mixes a passionate Russian revenge tragedy, an energetic physical staging and a live violin-and-piano soundtrack. After his father is left ruined seemingly on the whim of an old family friend, the young eponymous hero plots his vengeance, only to lose the very thing he was fighting for.

It's a pitiful story, lucidly conveyed by the young performers as it heads inexorably towards its crushing conclusion. It's hard not to admire their ambition, and the production's exciting movement-based sequences really mark it out – a cataclysmic fire scene, all flailing limbs, is particularly effective.

If only the speech clarity and the precision of the acting were on the same level. Lines key to character or plot are sometimes thrown away, the pace often drags, and some of the actors just aren't convincing in their roles. The staging might be striking, but more fundamental issues let the show down. (David Kettle)

■ *theSpace on North Bridge*, 0845 557 6308, until 11 Aug, 12.45pm, £7 (£5).

**THE GIRL WITH NO HEART**

Storybook fails to come to life ●●●●●

*The Girl with No Heart* is based on a short story book written by performer Louisa Ashton. A children's parable about the loss of innocence, Sparkle and Dark's Travelling Players use puppetry, silhouettes and origami to narrate the tale of a girl who journeys to a white-washed barren place full of ash where she meets a strange boy named Ike. With a paper set, white costumes and paper-based puppets, the production aims to literally bring the book to life.

The young company experiments with inventive and quirky visuals to achieve some lovely moments – a fluttering downpour of confetti, a cheeky origami lizard – though some props fail to dazzle. Similarly Ike, performed by two actors and a puppet, is at times winningly lifelike, particularly when he's being stropky, while at others the actors are distracting. A story needs more than paper and words to really take flight and, though sweet, *The Girl with No Heart* doesn't quite reach the levels of enchantment for which it strives. (Suzanne Black)

■ *Bedlam Theatre*, 225 9893, until 25 Aug (not 13), 5pm, £8 (£6).

**LIFE IS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE**

Not quite the whole truth ●●●●●

The place of truth, lies, delusion and self-realisation in our individual lives and across society is the big theme tackled in this one-man show that begins modestly and ends with a high-camp finale. Written and performed by Gable Roelofsen and directed by Romy Roelofsen, the show utilises the experiences of three disparate Americans – Stephen Glass, the journalist outed for faking stories for *The New Republic*, Barbara Ehrenreich, breast cancer survivor and author of the anti-positive thinking treatise, *Bright-Sided*, and Lady Gaga, the unhappy high-school kid who reinvented herself as a diva – to illustrate how honesty and dishonesty can both be used to good and bad ends depending on the context.

Unfortunately, as the show builds to its finale, this complex issue is reduced to the clichéd, if not untrue, conclusion that being true to oneself is what counts most in our lives. This is a show that doesn't quite live up to its initial promise. (Miles Fielder)

■ *Underbelly Cowgate*, 0844 545 8252, until 13 Aug, 11.35am, £8.50–£9.50 (£7.50–£8.50).

**THE BLIND**

Hugely powerful multimedia outdoor spectacle ●●●●●

Krakow-based KTO Theatre pulls off a rare feat in combining stunning visual effects with a potent emotional impact in its gripping, wordless show *The Blind*. Whether through pounding music, imagery that's by turns shocking and poignantly beautiful, or its physical performers' sheer animal energy, the company seems intent on engaging the audience in as direct a way as possible. And it works: it's hard to tear your eyes off the show, no matter how harrowing it becomes.

And after its edenic, childlike opening, all brightly coloured dresses and pirouetting couples, things quickly get pretty distressing. Based on a novel by Portuguese Nobel prize-winning author José Saramago, the spectacle traces the gradual breakdown of a society when a mysterious blindness afflicts its people.

At first encouraged to help and support each other by a doctor's wife, who's still sighted, the blind hoards soon form packs to fight for survival, carry out brutal acts to assert their dominance, and slowly succumb to disease and desperation – all observed from on high by a trio of sinister masked figures in biological protection suits.

It's a bleak assessment of our human relationships. But KTO Theatre refuses to wallow in the darkness, instead delivering spectacular set-pieces to tell its grim tale. Dozens of metal bed-frames, at first doled out to the newly blind, later form elaborate scaffolding contraptions to ensnare human victims, or shoot past the audience, propelled by the hunters. In one of the show's most sumptuously beautiful scenes, a powerful wind machine sends billowing clouds of glittering scarlet across the dancing performers and right out into the audience.

There are admittedly times when spectacle seems to come before storytelling clarity, and there's sometimes a sense of events unfolding rather arbitrarily. But it's all done with such visual flair that it's hard not to be swept up in the gripping emotions of this hugely powerful show. (David Kettle)

■ *Old College Quad*, 226 0000, until 27 Aug, times vary, £13–£15 (£10–£13).

