

## Comedians

Holmes's meticulous production retains the play's crusading vitality, says Michael Billington

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A van driver with Marcel Marceau aspirations ... David Dawson in the role of Gethin Price in *Comedians*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

First seen in 1975, Trevor Griffiths's play is a bold and daring work. It doesn't just analyse comedy. It presents it in its raw state, while obliquely commenting on class, race, gender and the condition of Britain. But, delighted as I am to see Sean Holmes reviving the play, I can't help feeling the cultural context in which we view it has radically changed.

The setting is a Manchester school room which houses a night class for apprentice comics. Their tutor, Eddie Waters, is an ageing idealist who instructs his pupils that a true joke has the potential to liberate the will and "change the situation". The talent scout who comes to judge them, Bert Challenor, is, however, a pragmatist who argues "we're not missionaries, we're suppliers of laughter". In the play's central act, set in a local club, we see how several of Waters's proteges change their material in accordance with the demands of the marketplace. One who emphatically doesn't is Gethin Price, who comes up with a weird act based on a mix of Grock-inspired mime and naked class-hatred.

As always in Griffiths, there is a dialectical confrontation: two views of comedy are proposed, standing for a larger social division between progressives and reactionaries. Griffiths also has the courage to show as well as tell, so that the

middle act offers a vast range of comic styles – from the peddling of racial and sexual stereotypes, to Price's sadistic revenge on privilege.

But, for all its audacity, that crucial middle act has lost some of its original power. The kind of prejudice reinforcing comedy Griffiths was attacking may still exist, but it no longer occupies the central position it did on TV in the 1970s. Comedy has moved on; and, if there is a contemporary target crying out for satire, it is the over-extended confessional monologue that is now the dominant form.

Even if comedy has changed, the piece itself remains an extraordinary mix of wordplay and state-of-the-nation drama. It calls for exceptional acting, and it certainly gets it from David Dawson in the role of Gethin, originally played by Jonathan Pryce. With shaven head, whippet frame and piercing gaze, Dawson offers a striking physical image. What he also conveys is the mix of fey and cruel in this van driver with aspirations to be a politicised Marcel Marceau. It is a stunning performance, strongly buttressed by Matthew Kelly as the weary but still optimistic Waters, and by Keith Allen as the commercialised Challenor. And, amongst the striving comics, Mark Benton and Reece Shearsmith poignantly show a sibling double-act falling apart in mid-performance.

Griffiths' play is of its time but, in Holmes's meticulous production it retains its crusading vitality.