

Comedy, politics, humanity – it's the way they tell 'em

Comedians
Lyric, Hammersmith

What are the politics of comedy? Is laughter always subversive, or do some jokes just support the status quo? The great thing about veteran radical Trevor Griffiths' 1975 classic, *Comedians*, is that this subject is debated with grace as well as humour. As six apprentice comedians attend a night class run by the veteran stand-up Eddie Waters, they find that their hunger for stardom clashes with his desire to use comedy to make a difference – to change society.

As played by Matthew Kelly, Waters comes across as avuncular, hurt and washed up. When he explains how a limerick is "a joke that hates women", it is a masterclass demonstration of the way comedy can bolster prejudice. But it's his relationship with his best pupil, Gethin Price, that forms the emotional core of the drama. Like any good teacher, there is a paternal streak in his interaction with Price, just as there is something Oedipal about Price's need to rebel.

In the showdown audition scene, when the other wannabes – played by funny men including Reece Shearsmith and Mark Benton – are trying their hardest to tickle the laughter muscle of Challoner, the visiting talent spotter on whose decision their future depends, Price decides to subvert the event. His stand-up routine – a frighteningly intense

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good account of their highly individual characters but also fill the stage with a panorama of comic styles. Hoping to please Challoner, played with smooth insincerity by Keith Allen, their routines are peppered with racist, sexist and every other ist sort of jokes – a testament to a world of humour we have thankfully left behind.

But it is the final conflict between Waters and Price, when the older man reveals that he lost his interest in comedy after visiting the death camps at the end of the Second World War, that makes this such a highly-charged piece. Griffiths' brief but profound exploration of the dark heart of genocide gives the play its radical edge.

Directing his first production as the new artistic director of this venue, Sean Holmes brings out the desperate longing of the men's lust for celebrity, as well as the sharp conflict between Waters and Price. For while, Shearsmith and Benton as the squabbling brothers seem to be a kind of hilarious Little and Large. And Dawson's gobsnacking routine reminds you that performance can be both mesmerising and dangerous.

On one level, *Comedians* is an account of



Comedians: graceful and humourous

piece of aggressive alternative comedy some five years before the genre was invented – is a dramatic highpoint, with the lithe David Dawson lending Price a fine mix of elfin lightness, as well as cold fury.

As you would expect, Benton and Shearsmith, as well as Billy Carter, Simon Kunz and Michael Dylan, not only give a

the tension in comedy between telling the truth and selling out; on another, it seems like a metaphor for left-wing political activism. Because the play so precisely captures its moment – the mid-1970s of skin-heads, strikes and overt class antagonism – it now feels slightly dated. And yet it is about so much more than comedy or politics. In its deep concern for truth, its compassion for human suffering and its moments of blazing anger, it feels absolutely up to date. ●

Aleks Sierz