

## Comedians at the Lyric Hammersmith, review

Rating: \* \* \*

Sean Holmes's production of *Comedians at the Lyric Hammersmith* beautifully captures the sleazy milieu of the comedy world.

By [Charles Spencer](#)

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Matthew Kelly brings a sad, battered dignity to the stage as the old comedian Eddie Waters

Photo: HELEN MAYBANKS

Trevor Griffiths scored the biggest hit of his career with *Comedians* (1975), an extremely serious play about what makes us laugh.

If that sounds like a mixed compliment, it's meant to. There are some great jokes, some beautifully drawn characters and a moving depth of feeling in this play.

But there is also far too much earnestness, moments when you feel that Griffiths, the unrepentant Lefty, is the victim of a terrible sense of humour failure. He appears to be the kind of man who will only laugh at a joke if he approves of its morality. Whereas in my view, the great anarchic virtue of comedy is that it makes us laugh at things that ought to appal us. God help me, I've laughed at Bernard Manning in my time.

There is, however, no doubt that Griffiths had a great dramatic idea here. The action begins in a Manchester schoolroom where an old and splendidly

lugubrious music-hall comedian, Eddie Waters, offers classes in stand-up comedy to all comers. At a time in the Seventies when racist and sexist jokes were all the rage, the tired and battered Waters now seems like a prophet of the alternative comedy of the Eighties.

He tells his students that they mustn't deal in racial stereotypes or tell jokes that hate women. "A joke that feeds on ignorance starves its audience," he insists. This strikes me as a didactic playwright speaking rather than a variety comedian, but mercifully matters improve with the arrival of a sleazy talent-spotter, Bert Challenor, who could actually get the budding comics work. He has no truck with Eddie's view of comedy as a healing art. He just wants laughs, no matter how low you have to go to get them.

All this results in a brilliant second act in a working men's club where the comedians perform for the scout. Some stick to Eddie's humane philosophy, and die a horrible death. Others change their act to pander to Challenor. And one shaven-headed, white-faced comic, in the role that made Jonathan Pryce's name, gives an entirely humourless performance of cold, calculated class-hatred that is revolutionary in its intent.

It all makes for theatre that is at once funny, unsettling and thought provoking, though in the final act Griffiths once again can't resist spelling it all out, and adding a line about the Holocaust to explain Waters's humanism that has always struck me as being both cheap and unpersuasive.

Director Sean Holmes beautifully captures the sleazy milieu of the comedy world, but he should have cut some of Griffiths's earnest verbiage. Matthew Kelly brings a lovely sad, battered dignity to the stage as the old comedian, Keith Allen is authentically vile as Challenor, while David Dawson plays the charismatic, hate-filled rebel with a Marxist cause with chilling intensity.

Oddly enough though, by far the funniest performance comes from Paul Rider, who turns the tiny roles of a caretaker and a club secretary into pure comic gold.