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Comedians at The Lyric, Hammersmith

By Dominic Maxwell



Can comedy change the world, or does it just offer a temporary release from it? Trevor Griffiths was hunting some big game in 1975 when his drama about six aspiring stand-ups first appeared at the Nottingham Playhouse — before going on to make the name of its young star, Jonathan Pryce, in the West End and on Broadway.

This revival by Sean Holmes can't have the same impact now, fine though it is — the comedy mainstream that these men lean towards or against has changed for good, even allowing for the recent reintroduction of “ironic” sexism, racism and homophobia into comedy. This is a period piece, yet it's organised around what's effectively a talent contest, chiming nicely with our karaoke culture. Anthony Lamb's design wears its period trappings lightly on its sleeve. And its debates about art and commerce, about selling out versus remaining pure yet poor, are timeless.

In a Manchester night school, six men hope to break out of their humdrum lives through their talent for comedy. For their teacher, Eddie Waters, played by Matthew Kelly, comedy only matters when it's addressing difficult truths. But Keith Allen's bow-tied talent scout, Challenor, tells them that he wants entertainers, not preachers: “I'm looking for someone who sees what the people want and knows how to give it to them.” Will they change their acts to please him? Amid the laughs — *Comedians* is stuffed with jokes, though it's not exactly a comedy — there's constant conflict. Reece Shearsmith and Mark Benton excel as a warring double act of brothers, who self-destruct

when one tries to sell out and the other refuses. And David Dawson, animated, almost camp in the Pryce role as the comic revolutionary Gethin Price, is brilliant. But the hatred that fires his belly also makes his act performance art, not comedy.

There are strong performances from Billy Carter as the Belfast comic George McBrain and Michael Dylan as the well-meaning Irishman Mick Connor. Simon Kunz looks uncomfortable as the Jewish comic Sammy Samuels, though, while Kelly has a fidgetiness that takes away from Waters' gravitas, which disrupts the rhythm of the first act. But Allen is superb, illuminating the performer's instinct of a man who has found his niche and inhabits it with relish. And Paul Rider, excelling in two peripheral roles, has a natural comic knack that reminds us of the most important element of comedy, one that not even this wonderfully well-constructed, constantly stimulating play can add to: you've either got it or you haven't.