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What's on Stage

Comedians: have they got talent? By Michael Coveney

Sean Holmes's fine revival of Trevor Griffiths' modern classic *Comedians* is a reminder of how little great new work is produced on the regional theatre main stages these days.

The first night at the Nottingham Playhouse in February 1975 was an electrifying occasion, and not just because of the career-defining performance of Jonathan Pryce alongside Stephen Rea, Tom Wilkinson and Jimmy Jewel.

The premiere occurred slap bang in the first eighteen months of Richard Eyre's artistic directorship, a period in which he premiered David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Brassneck*, Adrian Mitchell's Yorkshire version of *The Government Inspector*, Brenton's *The Churchill Play* and Ken Campbell's *Bendigo*.

Bliss was it that dawn to be alive...and reviewing. Dave Hill, who co-authored *Bendigo* with Ken Campbell and appeared in *Comedians* as Ged Murray, the Manchester City-supporting milkman played at the Lyric by Mark Benton, was in the audience last night.

And so was Richard Eyre, who scheduled the play before seeing a first draft and defied his board's wishes by putting it on.

The play went on to become a huge success, of course, and Pryce won a Tony award when he appeared in Mike Nichols's production on Broadway. Peter Hall scheduled the play at the National and it transferred later to Wyndham's.

In 1974, Eyre was one of the co-signatories of a letter to *The Times* denouncing the huge amounts of money the National Theatre was attracting, he and others felt, away from the regional theatre. He was good at fighting his corner.

But Peter Hall had spotted his successor, and the success of *Comedians* eventually paved Eyre's way to the top job in London. He hadn't seen *Comedians* for a very long time, but was thoroughly enjoying, he told me, Sean Holmes's revival.

The small roles of the grumpy school caretaker and the unimpressed bingo caller in the night club where the budding comics strut their stuff with mixed results are doubled at the Lyric, and very nicely, too, by Paul Rider.

In the Nottingham premiere, the roles were taken by Richard Simpson and John Joyce, regulars in Eyre's company.

Sadly, Joyce died recently of oesophageal cancer aged 70, and his funeral takes place tomorrow in Golders Green. He was a stalwart in all those ground-breaking Nottingham productions by Eyre.

Joyce, who trained as an accountant in Melbourne, was an archetypal fringe actor of the period, and a little older than most people around him — he had played Young Dogsborough in Michael Blakemore's famous 1969 production of Arturo Ui starring Leonard Rossiter, so he was much in demand as father figures and senior trades unionists.

He worked with all the key creative artists of the time — John McGrath, Eyre, Steven Berkoff, Ken Campbell — and was loved as much for his talent as his warm personality.

When he played the concert secretary in Comedians he was justly proud of the fact that, once he had worked out that it was a good idea not to like any of the acts he was presenting, he managed to secure several good laughs from just seventeen or so lines. As indeed did Rider last night.