

Show of the week

Waiting for Godot

TimeOut


Devastating double act *Ian McKellen and Roger Rees*

★★★★★

Theatre Royal Haymarket West End

The stage is blasted, derelict, overhung by a tattered curtain, scattered with lumps of fallen cornicing and encrusted in pigeon shit; Beckett's iconic lone tree forces its way up through ruptured planking. Sean Mathias's production, first seen last year and returning with a partial recast, is unusually specific about the location of Vladimir and Estragon's unending purgatorial attendance. This is a theatre within a theatre, and Didi and Gogo are unequivocally a pair of former vaudevillians, clinging together on the scrapheap of life and longing for some sort of salvation.

This is a warm, tender 'Godot', generous in its compassion. Often, in drama as in life, pain is more acutely felt when what is played is the endurance rather than the agony; so

it proves here, with Ian McKellen as Estragon and Roger Rees, replacing Patrick Stewart as Vladimir, creating a partnership so simply moving and so layered with a sense of shared history and vicissitude that you almost expect that decrepit willow tree to weep. Rees brings a heartrending gentleness, and a mounting despair that he doggedly battens down, to Didi; McKellen's Northern Estragon is volatile, frustrated, befuddled. In their partnership we see not just the low-rent comedy double act they once were, but a bickering married couple, a parent and a child and a pair of lifelong, do-or-die best friends. Rees cradles McKellen's head and sings him to sleep; McKellen suggests they part, and Rees trembles at the thought of being alone. It's a mutual dependency that sometimes hurts, and can never entirely heal, yet it is a kind of devotion: when Rees tells McKellen, his shin bloodied by vicious

kick from Ronald Pickup's Lucky, I'll carry you, if necessary, you can picture him doing it, doubled over with effort.

And the wounds - existential and physical - really smart here. As McKellen peels off his battered boots from his filthy feet, you can almost feel the ache, the stinging of those suppurating blisters. Rees's head-bowing shame, as once again prey to his treacherous bladder he is left piss-stained and flies agape, wounds too; by night both are trapped, by Paul Pyant's lyrical lighting, in a pitiless disc of hard white moonlight. Pickup's Lucky, his eyes haunted, is a horrifying spectacle of brutalised semi-compliance, and though Matthew Kelly's Pozzo doesn't dwindle to become sufficiently pitiable on his second appearance, he is compulsively, grotesquely repellent. It's harrowing, it's funny, it's human: go and see it, and laugh till you cry.