

# Awake and Sing!



**Spooning out motherly advice** Stockard Channing

★★★★  
Almeida Theatre O-WE

It must have been very exciting to be at the premiere of Clifford Odets' *'Awake and Sing!'* in 1935 when most New Yorkers would have identified with the people on stage and their struggle to survive during the depression. Odets' play focuses on a Jewish family living in genteel poverty in the Bronx on several meagre salaries and a rich relative's occasional handouts. They eat, they worry, and they argue. The family is divided between Marxism and capitalism, and idealism and pragmatism. John Rogan's grandfather, Jacob, and Ben Turner's Ralph dream of revolution; while Stockard Channing's Bessie Berger is determined to keep the family going even at the expense of her children's happiness. Although Odets' heart was presumably on the side of Jacob and Ralph, it's Bessie's dry humour, shrewdly delivered by Channing, and the robust cynicism of Nigel Lindsay's Moe Axelrod that dominate the stage, the latter a Damon Runyon-

like gangster who is comfortably living off a government pension after losing a leg in the war. When Hennie (Jodie Whittaker) gets pregnant after a one-night stand, she has to choose between being foisted on feeble, devoted Sam (there are shades of Chekhov in the couple's relationship) and an uncertain future with the wise-talking Axelrod.

Odets knew the importance of economic independence. 'Without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye,' says Bessie emphatically. Is the play a museum piece or does it still have a kick in our affluent society today? Well, Michael Attenborough's sturdy production brings out the perennial need for self-fulfilment, and will get even better as the cast bed further down in their roles and make the most of Odets' grainy poetry. The opening night was enhanced by the presence of the Oscar-winning film actress, Luise Rainer, in the audience, a fascinating link with the play's history in that she was married to Odets for three stormy years. *Jane Edwards*

# When Midnight Strikes

★★★★  
Finborough Theatre Fringe

'Y2K' fears are revisited in this new musical by the Anglo-American writing team of Charles Miller and Kevin Hammonds. Will all the computers cease to function on the stroke of midnight, bringing modern life as we know it to a standstill? And, of more immediate concern to the guests at well-heeled Manhattanites Jennifer and Christopher West's New Millennium party, will the golden couple decide to split up because of Christopher's affair?

The twelve characters, improbably packed into Wai Yin Kwok's ultra-smart, black-and-white clockface stage design like so many elephants in a Mini, are classic murder-mystery types: the scarlet woman; the enigmatic stranger; the geeky businessman; the extrovert who 'marches round the room like some Gay Pride float'. There's such a strong flavour of Agatha-Christie-in-the-Big-Apple that

you keep expecting the body to be produced and the detective to enter to start solving the whodunnit. Instead, the only mystery is the identity of Christopher's other woman (or man).

If Hammonds' book fails to deliver on its millennial premise – given the epochal build-up, the question of whether the Wests' marriage will survive seems almost inconsequential – *'When Midnight Strikes'* is still rancorously diverting. In Fenton Gray's stylish production the dialogue is at its best when it's at its bitchiest, and the songs likewise thrill most when the gloves come off. *'Shut Up'* establishes the fractured, fractious mood of the revellers, while *'It's Not a Party 'Til Something Gets Broken'* kicks off the knock-out final sequence in suitably pugilistic fashion. But it's the Latin-flavoured seduction number *'Party Conversation'*, which sees more than just gloves coming off, that's the evening's highlight. *Robert Shore*

# Fragile!

★★★★  
Arcola Theatre O-WE

'I think this city is not very good for people,' says Tiasha, a refugee recently arrived in London. 'Nobody looks anybody in the eyes. Is everyone here ashamed?'

Shame is merely one of the emotions threading through Tena Stivicic's vibrant new play, which powerfully depicts the real lives behind the new wave of eastern European immigration to the capital. Marko and Mila are a young Serb and Croat working in a bar. Mila, the club's singer, is dating a Norwegian journalist because 'he's Scandinavian – they're reliable'. But Erik, who has both seen and survived death while war reporting in the Balkans, is nothing of the sort. And when one of his former stories – a young sex slave named Tiasha – arrives claiming asylum, the drama begins.

Edward Kingham's performance as the arrogant, coke-snorting Erik is superb. Under Michael Gielata's thoroughly assured direction, relationships twist and tauten as Marko, played by the infinitely likeable Joseph Garton, falls for Tiasha's case worker, Gayle. There's a blackish humour throughout, and lighter moments from John Moraitis as Michi, the wheeler-dealing bar owner whose mobile phone seems grafted to his ear.

But it is the contrasting characters of Mila and Tiasha which make the piece so compelling. Rayisa Kondracki's fiery Mila burns with a surprisingly naive



*Immigrants in London*

optimism, while Catherine Cusack brings an extraordinary depth to Tiasha, a young woman who has become so inured to suffering that she seems almost quizzical at the anxiety surrounding her.

There are two complaints. First, Georgiana James's Gayle – a New Zealander whose insensitivity to the pain around her is at times cartoonish – never rings true. Second, Stivicic allows her ideas to run away with her; a little less metaphysical musing would save this fighting script from a slightly punch-drunk ending. *Emma John*

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