

Hortensia and the Museum of Dreams

Finborough Theatre

■ An unusual family reunion sits at the heart of this atmospheric, well-acted drama by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz. In 1961, Cuban-born brother and sister Luciana and Luca were sent to live in America under Operation Peter Pan – a plot devised by dissidents who believed their children would otherwise be banished to Russia. Now, in 1998, the estranged siblings have separately returned for the first time, just as Pope John Paul II makes a historic visit to the communist state. Luciana, played with cool, calm understatement by Irini Venieri, is a journalist here to cover the event, but becomes waylaid when she meets small-town visionary Hortensia who wishes to open a “museum of dreams” – letters from people who’ve experienced religious “miracles” – against the authorities’ wishes. Luca (Marcello Walton) meanwhile, meets a young Cuban girl who feeds her dreams of escape through this enigmatic foreigner.

Cruz’s wonderfully lyrical use of language helps to echo the steamy, stifling atmosphere of a Tennessee Williams play, in a shambolic land where the electricity cuts out after dark, and the night is lit by fireflies in jars. The growing affection for Luciana by Hortensia’s sons, depicted with fantastically youthful exuberance by Simon Harrison and Alex Waldmann, is played beautifully under Michael Gieleta’s measured direction. Linda Bassett, of *East is East*, is well cast as the neurotic but adamant Hortensia. Meanwhile, the set effortlessly evokes the crumbling colonial buildings of Cuba, with its peeling painted shutters and stained ochre walls. All in all, a moving tale of individuals coming to terms with their damaged pasts – both personal and national – and learning to hope again against the odds. (See Fringe)

★★★★★ CHERYL FREEDMAN

Effie May

Oval House Theatre

■ At Oval Tube station, the staff often chalk up a thought for the day. When I went to see Allister Bain’s new play, *Effie May*, the board read: “Do not depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” This seemed an apt enough idea to carry into Bain’s 80-minute comedy thriller, which is set in 1950s Grenada.

Under the brooding Caribbean sky, *Effie May* – a wealthy woman who has fallen on hard times – looks after the house while Theo, her husband, works away from home. For company, she lets her slightly half-witted cousin, Eldora, keep house. But, when Theo comes home for the weekend, it soon becomes clear that not only is he playing away,

but he’s also making eyes at Eldora.

Bain writes in a lively style which evokes the Caribbean as surely as the white rum that Theo drinks and the spells, curses and poisons employed by Eldora in her bid to usurp Effie’s place. Instead of trusting to good looks alone, Eldora gives nature a helping hand and emerges as a vicious she-devil. Effie’s tragedy is that, despite the help of her friends (the local priest, John John the handy man and her ward Alfred) she underestimates her rival – until it’s too late.

This is a very traditional play, with a plot exposition that sometimes drags its feet, but the dialogue is well-written and director Dawn Walton gets solid performances from Alibe Parsons as Effie, Naomi Taylor as Eldora and Geoffrey Burton as Theo. And if this tale makes West Indian women appear as grasping manipulators, it doesn’t do its glibble men any favours either. (See Fringe)

★★★★★ ALEKS SIERZ

Kissing With Tongues

Etcetera Theatre

■ Rare to find an amusing history lesson on the Fringe. But Melanie Branton’s first play is like a speed-read through the middle chapters of Melvyn Bragg’s *The Adventure of English*, a potted biography of the language we speak each day of our lives, plus a few well-chosen pages from *New Society*, as a side serving.

The tongues of the title are Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, and the kissing actually took place after the Conquest – 1066 and all that – when posh Froggies stuck their Latinate tongue very firmly down our peasant Anglican throats. But in the end the simpler local lingo won out, enriched by the invaders’ more poetic vocabulary.

The setting for this crash course is a 60-minute private tutorial given by a failed schoolmaster with his head full of words and ideas, and a 17-year-old A-Level student of English language whose mum thinks it worth paying 25 quid an hour to help get her child a place at Uni. But it’s not long before sex rears its naughty head as Timothy Block’s Godwin finds certain four-letter words the best way to grab attention when teaching the virtues of Old English to Jenny Hurren’s balky Tracey. Alas he has an unearned reputation for touching-up schoolgirls, while Tracey with the shortest skirt ever, thinks he’s just a dirty old man. Thus the disapproving Mrs Godwin (Deborah May) constantly pops in to keep an eye, at one point chucking a tumbler of water over the pedagogue to cool him down. (See Fringe)

★★★★★ JOHN THAXTER