

Lingua Franca, Finborough theatre, review

The Finborough theatre is stiflingly hot and not a room with a view, but the writing perfectly evokes Florence in the Fifties. Rating: * * *



Charlotte Randle (Peggy) and Chris New (Steven) in Lingua Franca by Peter Nichols

By Dominic Cavendish

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The young Englishman is trying to get his class of Italian students to repeat a few basic phrases in English involving the same three items of cutlery – knife, spoon and fork. An exasperating business. When he attempts to speak in Italian, they laugh at him. He snaps back.

Suddenly, he's faced with dismissal. He has gone too far. The youth begs to stay on, though. "I've fallen in love," he exclaims.

Who wouldn't fall in love with Florence in their twenties? And in the Fifties, especially? Steven Flowers, the protagonist of Peter Nichols's new play – and a character you'd swiftly identify as a portrait of the artist himself, even if you hadn't already encountered him in *Privates on Parade* – can't show us the city. The Finborough theatre is a room above a pub, not a room with a view. Michael Gieleta's conscientious production can only give us some Venetian blinds, a few projections and an innately hot, stifling atmosphere, thanks to the lack of air-con. And yet the writing is perfectly evocative; we can picture for ourselves the magnificence of what lies outside the staffroom when

Chris New's brimful Steven rhapsodises about it and all the latest Italian in-things: "Narrow ties, Gaggia machines, Gina Lollobrigida."

Nichols turns 83 next week and, aside from marvelling at his perseverance, you wonder whether the odd tear trickled down his cheeks as he wrote this. *Lingua Franca* has an elegiac strain, even as it warms to the memory of headstrong, ardent youth pictured at the centre of a motley crew of fellow amateurs in pedagogy: Irena, a former Russian communist (Rula Lenska); Madge, a gruff Australian (Abigail McKern); Heidi, a beautiful German with unfortunate reserves of Führer-worship (Natalie Walter); plus two A-grade English eccentrics – Jestin, a moralising and ageing celibate (Ian Gelder), and Peggy (Charlotte Randle), a fearfully uptight lass whose adoration of Steven is not remotely reciprocated.

Nichols has tinged the evening with a certain wisdom after the event – he suggests how, in his pursuit of a better world, Steven, along with many of his generation, turned west to America and lost something in the bargain. Yet it hardly needs such an argument. Simple nostalgia from Nichols is enough in itself. As a scrapbook sketch of bygone days – funny, touching and true – this gentle memoir more than warrants a look.

Tickets: 0844 847 1652. To Aug 7



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