

British Theatre Guide

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Bananaman

Book, music & lyrics by Leon Parris

Sightline Entertainment in association with Cahoots Theatre Company and Beano Studios

Southwark Playhouse (The Large)

15 December 2017–20 January 2018

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it? ? No. It's Bananaman, kid's comic-book hero and now star of a wacky, seriously silly musical.

Bananaman was created for the first issue of DC Thomson's *Nutty* in 1980 and has since featured in both *The Dandy* and *The Beano* and as a TV cartoon. A caped figure bulging with muscles, he's a parody version of the other cartoon supermen. In the original version, he arrived on Earth from the Moon as a baby but in 1991 his origin was changed to being an ordinary human baby and that's what we have here, now teenager Eric Wimp.

Eric is a likeable lad who lives in Acacia Road, an ordinary youngster except that after eating a banana there's a change. Then he can fly and bulges with the muscles of twenty big blokes, though sadly becomes somewhat stupid with no more brains than have twenty mussels. He doesn't always put his power to good purpose—but his heart is in the right place and it has already been captured by schoolfellow Fiona (sparky Emma Ralston).

Emma likes Mark Newnham's boy-next-door Eric but he's no pop-idol. It is when Matthew McKenna takes over as the yellow-caped warrior, muscles bulging inside his blue body-suit, that she finds a new hero, not knowing it is actually Eric.

Leon Parris begins his musical Bananaman adventure with his baddies and a duet between a pillar-box and a dustbin: now that must be a first! These are the first of many disguises adopted by the wicked General Blight (who has an Evil Plan) and his associate Doctor Gloom. In a green Mussolini-like uniform with a steel helmet, Carl Mullaney looks firmly set on world domination and as purple-clad Dr Gloom, with deep-fringe moustache and outsize spectacles Marc Pickering is at the same time even more menacing and deliciously funny.

Can T J Lloyd's cheery Police Chief O'Reilly outwit these baddies, equipped with their hi-tech ray guns, free Fiona when they abduct her, save the world from their domination? Even with help from Eric and the Crow who has become his familiar (a high octane part puppetry performance from Jodie Jacobs) it isn't an outcome to bet on—and even with Bananaman's intervention things can go wrong: indeed at one point he too is captured.

The staging is simple in front of illustrations from the original comics, with a few sliding panels above a sort of portico and a collapsible staircase trundled on when needed but it's costumed straight out of comic pages. Designer Mike Leopold gives us school chums and locals like Bash Street Kids and there are visual jokes such as Chief O' Reilly's flashing blue lamp on his smart cap.

Even though what would be five frame cartoon stories stretch out for half an hour, I have to confess that at times I didn't really know what was going on. Volume is so loud and lyrics delivered so

frantically that I only got half of them. Perhaps part of the problem is that the presentation tends to be frontal despite having an audience on three sides.

The tunes are lively but seem rather samey, the dancing energetic and director Mark Perry and choreographer Grant Murphy have molded a performance style that equates to cartooning (for the baddies especially) which makes it great fun and the cast deliver it enthusiastically.

It is very silly, but that's really the point and a key part of the enjoyment: you should approach it in the spirit of a six-year old. If you can't, then maybe it's not for you.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)