

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Bette and Joan

Anton Burge  
Arts Theatre  
(2011)

The golden age of Hollywood was brutal but produced glamour that is unknown today, aided by the pre-twitter magic of *not* knowing every minor personal detail, the innocent allure of cigarettes, and the mystery and un-attainability of stars.

Two such stars, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, are brought to the stage in actor-writer Anton Burge's *Bette and Joan*, at the Arts Theatre for a world premiere and limited run.

We are provided with a snapshot of a particular time (1962) and event: in their respective dressing rooms (stripped and plain for Bette, opulent and 'dressy' for Joan), the divas prepare to shoot the infamous 'wheelchair' scene in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

This was the film that brought these long-term rivals together, partly to prove that forty-something actresses should not just curl up and die in a corner, an issue that is alarmingly pertinent today.

A major attraction for this two-hander is surely the opportunity to see renowned actresses of stage, screen and TV - Greta Scacchi and Anita Dobson - on stage together and indeed their chemistry is joyous and infectious, their comic timing impeccable.

Under Bill Alexander's direction we are given impressions, or nuances of character, rather than impersonations of Davis and Crawford and this works to the production's advantage.

Greta Scacchi - perhaps instantly associated with *White Mischief* - gets Bette's rather odd English-ed American accent down to a tee. As Joan, Anita Dobson (formerly Angie Watts in *EastEnders*) has perfected the art of the Crawford smile (that wasn't *really* a smile) and the turn of phrase - 'bless you' for 'thank you' - that became her trademark.

This camp and glossy evening combines monologue and direct conversation in a script that is witty and biting, caustic and cruel, as they talk of men, women, love, sex, the film industry, ageing - and of course, each other.

And although the press night audience found much to laugh at, there is undoubted poignancy in the sense that a glossy finish of thirty years' bitter rivalry possibly concealed an undercoat of grudging love and respect.

At just over two hours, my reverie was interrupted by an interval that felt a little intrusive but is probably necessary for the performers, given the amount of dialogue.

With a goodbye to Judy's *End of the Rainbow* imminent, the production feels timely and topical as two legends of a certain age are made flesh by two performers who prove how fabulous women are at forty-plus.

*Runs to 25th June*

**Reviewer:** [Anita-Marguerite Butler](#)