

British Theatre Guide

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Follow My Leader

Alistair Beaton
Hampstead Theatre
(2004)

One of the old Hampstead Theatre's greatest successes in the final period before it brought down its final curtain was Alistair Beaton's superb political satire, *Feelgood*. After a sell-out at the tiny Hampstead, it then it received a lucrative West End transfer.

Follow My Leader is a different animal. Like Justin Butcher's [The Madness of George Dubya](#), it is a political satire on the dynamic duo of Blair and Bush. Unlike that play, it has no narrative drive and relies on a series of sketches, the best of which are extremely funny. As an example, an Iraqi television news report of the disappearance and possible death of Tony Blair, not to mention the use of doubles, is the show's high point.

It is worth going to the theatre just to see Philip Whitcomb's sets and costumes, which between them must have cost a pretty penny. The major features of the set are a proscenium arch created from the Star-Spangled Banner and two 25 ft high projection screens.

In this setting, the play follows the joint careers of Tony Blair, played uncannily well by Jason Durr. This is so much the case that when the lights initially focus on him, there is a moment of recognition when one might believe that the producers had achieved the coup of the century and persuaded our Prime Minister to appear in person. While Stewart Milligan's George W Bush relies more on make-up and personality, he is also convincing enough.

After an opening song, we are thrown into a meeting between Blair and a God who tells him his destiny. Peter Polycarpou plays him, looking and sounding like Bob Hoskins in dark glasses, a sequinned black jacket and white shoes.

For the next two and a half hours, Beaton trots out comic sketches together with songs with his own lyrics and music from Richard Blackford, played on the piano by Warren Wills. The best of the songs is one about Donald Rumsfeld's "anticipatory self defence".

At their strongest, both songs and sketches contain moments of brilliance, but it is very obvious that there is not enough material to sustain this length. Typically, a political sketch show on TV starring somebody like Rory Bremner might last for half or three-quarters of an hour and the equivalent to four or five successive doses palls.

Eventually, Alistair Beaton ships in scenes such as a series of xenophobic jokes from The Sun or Blair swearing that bear no relationship to the overall story of two men's relationship and the wars that it causes.

Follow My Leader is rather like a bridal trousseau. Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. It is the kind of show that divides its audience. Those who love Alistair Beaton's television work and enjoy political satire containing great impressions and some

bouncy songs will be screaming with joy at the end. Others might appreciate the fun but will not be too sorry when the final curtain eventually comes down.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)