

British Theatre Guide

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Happy Birthday, Wanda June

Kurt Vonnegut Jnr

Act Up

Old Red Lion Theatre

30 October–24 November 2012

This surreal satire on America's macho masculinity, both personal and political, was written by the author of *Slaughterhouse 5* in the 1960s.

It was originally called *Penelope*, its title character named for Odysseus's wife who has been long waiting for her husband to return, suitors in attendance urging her to accept he must be dead and her twelve-year-old son devoted to remembering his dad. It premièred under its present title in New York in 1970 and was produced at the Bush in 1977.

"This is a simple-minded play," Penelope tells us, "about men who enjoy killing—and those who don't." Husband Harold Ryan is definitely one of those who do; their home is still decorated with his hunting trophies. It is eight years since he went off to the Amazon jungle with sidekick and helicopter pilot Looseleaf Harper.

Now neighbour Dr Norbert Woodley and vacuum cleaner salesman Herb Shuttle both want to take his place. Shuttle professes to admire Ryan but Dr Woodley, to whom Penelope has become sort of engaged, is a peacemaker. Her son Paul disapproves of both of them.

Presumably to emphasize the macho divide, director Ant Stones has black actors playing Harold (Vincent Jerome) and Looseleaf (Marcus Powell) and the gentler men by women. Katy Slater plays Woodley, Emma-Jane Martin Shuttle and Fiona Drummond young Paul.

Shuttle is taking Penelope to the pictures to Paul's annoyance. He remembers it is his dad's birthday and thinks they should celebrate it. To pacify him, Woodley brings in a birthday cake he found unclaimed at the bakers. Its icing reads "Happy Birthday, Wanda Jane"—and that's not the last we hear of her

As the plot proceeds with the return of Harold and a farcical succession of misunderstandings and confrontations, a change of lighting takes us to a different level and we meet not just Wanda Jane (Fiona Drummond), a little girl who has been knocked down by an ice cream van and is now in Heaven, but also the Nazi Major Siegfried von Konigswald, the Beast of Yugoslavia—the killing of whom was one of Harold's heroic wartime exploits—and Mildred (Katy Slater), Harold's third wife.

I gather that Vonnegut did several rewrites of the original script but it still sags a little in the second act. This version seems to have cut some of the only text I have seen and has added a hilarious (and possibly improvised) sequence of celestial carpet shuffleboard that greets the audience when they return from the interval. As Wanda tells us, in Heaven Jesus Christ is "just another guy playing shuffleboard" and wears a blue and gold jacket with "Pontius Pilate Athletic Club" written on the back.

The Heaven sequences are by far the funniest part of the play, especially Alix Dunmore's heavily-accented von Konigswald, and there is also a marvellously twitchy earthly monologue from Marcus Powell as Looseleaf about boy scouts and dropping the atom bomb on Nagasaki.

Vincent Jerome's Harold is perhaps too much the handsome hero. We can too easily like him. With three marriages, the Second World War and eight years in the jungle behind him, isn't this a paunchy middle-aged man still playing at macho?

It is not often that I feel characters need more guying but this seems to me to be essentially a cartoon of American mores. One might have thought the cross-gender casting would have helped that but it seems to make it weaker and this needs to be savage satire if it is really going to work.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)