

British Theatre Guide

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Jerusalem

Jez Butterworth
Apollo Theatre
(2010)

I didn't catch this when premiered at the Royal Court last year to critical acclaim and a sold-out run. What was it that made people rave about it? Now I know -- and I certainly agree that it is a fantastic piece of theatre: it lasts more than three hours but they go all too quickly for both play and production are a delight.

It's about England innit? It has to be when it starts with the English flag on a front cloth, a girl in a shiny shift and fairy wings and long flowing hair singing our English anthem, Parry's setting of "Jerusalem". It's also set on our patron saint St George's Day, April 23rd, which just happens also to be Shakespeare's Birthday.

How you interpret its complex metaphors probably depends upon where you coming from. Is it the drunks and druggies who've brought our country to where it is? Or is it the speculators who've built the brash new housing estate these characters look out at (sited just where the audience is sitting in the stalls) that have wrecked our green and pleasant land? Have we chucked out our national identity along with the ancient gods, lost our poetry and our imagination, left only with an ersatz re-invention of the bell-legged Morris dance?

At the heart of the play is Johnny 'Rooster' Byron. a man you could both love and loath. I'm sure most of those sitting in the £65 'premium' seats in the stalls would be horrified to find his caravan backed on to their gardens but they can't resist Mark Rylance's charismatic performance and when I saw it they give him a standing ovation.

Rooster is a man who starts the day with a pint pot full of milk to which he adds a liberal dose of vodka and a paper full of powder, then tucks it in the front of his trousers and wiggles his hips to stir it. He throws his rubbish over his shoulder and, the night before, in a drunken, drug-fuelled rave up with the local youth in the Wiltshire woodland where his shiny silver mobile home is parked, has trashed his own television set.

But he's also a man with a touch of magic. He claims to be of Romany stock and there is a touch of Puck about him: you feel there is some more ancient connection that fuels him, not just the illegal substances he deals in. He is said to have been a dare-devil rider, star of local fairs and festivals jumping his bike over lined up buses, still twitching a damaged leg from one disastrous accident. You can believe it, and he almost makes you believe his tales of meeting a giant who gave him a magic drum and claimed to have built Stonehenge. His stories are so full of reassuring incidental detail and throw-aways like saying he didn't really believe the giant was telling the truth.

On the surface this is a rip-roaring comedy until near the end, though from the start we learn that the local council is going to evict Rooster from his woodland idyll and in Rylance's performance there are the signs if you care to spot them that he knows things will end badly - though perhaps

not so badly as they do. This is a man of whom those he has alienated think much worse than he deserves and whose humiliation even those who buzz around him have perpetrated. Inside you know there is some deep inner pain that is hinted at in scenes with his little son and Dawn (Amy Beth Hayes), the boy's mother, who had clearly found him impossible to live with.

If Rooster is in some way a personification of the spirit of ancient England, those drawn to him - apart perhaps from Alan David's high-as-a-kite professor who knows everything about our ancient lore - are very much the victims of the present. Rooster is their escape valve, whether Gerard Horan's hen-pecked publican, Mackenzie Crook's wannabe DJ, Charlotte Mill's Tanya, dying to get laid by Tom Brooke's Lee, or Aimeé-ffion Edwards' Phaedra whose presence brings violent repercussions.

Director Ian Rickson has drawn exemplary performances from all his cast and welded together a production, designed by Ultz, that is a true ensemble work in which Rylance's superb performance is completely integrated as Rooster, star character not star actor.

Philip Fisher [reviewed](#) this production at the Royal Court in 2009

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Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)