

# British Theatre Guide

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

## Jubilee

Adapted for the stage by Chris Goode from the original screenplay by Derek Jarman and James Whaley

Royal Exchange Theatre

Royal Exchange Theatre

2–18 November 2017

On 4 June 1976 at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall, the Sex Pistols played a gig voted (along with Woodstock and Live Aid) as one of the most influential of all time; thousands claim to have been in the 150-capacity venue, which was less than a third full, but some of those who were went on to form massively influential bands such as Buzzcocks, The Smiths, The Fall and Joy Division / New Order, not to mention Factory Records and The Hacienda.

A year later, the Queen had her Silver Jubilee in the year *Never Mind The Bollocks* was released ("God save the Queen / The fascist regime"), then in 1978 punk had its own *Jubilee* in the form of Derek Jarman's film of that name, starring some major punk and alternative music figures including Toyah, Adam Ant, Siouxsie Sioux, Richard O'Brien, Little Nell, Jordan and Lindsay Kemp.

Toyah Willcox returns to the world of *Jubilee* but this time as Queen Elizabeth I, whose magician John Dee (Harold Finley) conjures up the spirit Ariel (Lucy Ellinson)—it gets quite Shakespearean in a few places—to transport her forwards in time, not to the broken, depressed streets of the 1970s but straight to the squat of Amyl Nitrate and her fellow residents, now translated into the 21st century.

Amyl acts as narrator, helping to contextualise what we see into the world of today with monologues that are so densely packed with wryly witty observations that many great lines were missed by the press night audience. Performance artist Travis Alabanza gives a brilliantly charismatic and assured performance, having great rapport with the audience, bringing out layers of meaning especially regarding gender and sexuality—a hot topic at the moment.

Also in the squat are Sphinx (Craig Hamilton) and Angel (Tom Ross-Williams)—brothers who spend much of the play naked and in incestual entanglements—fire-loving Mad (Temi Wilkey), sex-hating Bod (Sophie Stone) and nymphomaniac / "sex positive" (choose the language of your favourite era) Crabs, with Rose Wardlaw definitely channeling the spirit of Little Nell (who was also the original Columbia in *Rocky Horror* on stage and screen).

Crabs picks up a young musician known only as Kid—Yandass Ndlovu with a white stripe across her nose, presumably in homage to Adam Ant who played the part in the film. Crabs takes her to impresario Borgia Ginz (Harold Finley, whose delivery is misjudged to make the character more annoying than funny) who wants to sign her up but Angel and Sphinx try to talk her out of it.

Sphinx and Angel are also sleeping with a performance artist, Viv (Lucy Ellinson), and become part of her show, but the police arrive with guns and start killing people. The co-squatters, to whom the occasional casual murder isn't unknown, decide to take revenge on the police. Amyl gives a

depressingly nihilistic speech, then Queen Elizabeth I / Toyah comes down to take over one of her hit songs ("I Want To Be Free") from the person playing the part she originated—complete with panto songsheet in case the audience wants to join in.

It's a rambling mess of a show that's far too long but one that is very entertaining in parts and occasionally has something interesting to say. The problem is that it is all very tame: more jumbled than anarchic. When the renaissance changes to the chaos of the squat, it feels like it should erupt into noise and action, but it's more of a whimper (Amyl later asks for the music to be loud, "not just Royal Exchange loud", but even then it barely gets past teenager's bedroom loud, let alone rock gig loud).

Despite Amyl's speeches, it doesn't feel like a play about now; it's a piece from the '70s with its heart in that decade but with some updated references to make it seem modern. And there's nothing to really challenge or question the views of a comfortable, middle-class Royal Exchange audience in the way that the establishment was shaken up by the punk movement. To be frank, I've been watching writhing, naked bodies on the Royal Exchange main stage in all combinations of gender and genderlessness for the last thirty years, so it's unlikely to raise so much as an eyebrow.

When the biggest worry of the PR department is causing offence by the use of gendered pronouns, it obviously isn't expected that this production will spark the revolution to overthrow our whole system of government that all loyal punks, anarchists and communists in the '70s knew was just around the corner. But it's a lot of fun in parts.

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)