

British Theatre Guide

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A Night at the Dogs

Matt Charman
Soho Theatre
(2005)

For anyone who is a fan of *Only Fools and Horses*, the first half of Matt Charman's award-winning play will prove a delight.

Neil (*Game On*) Stuke's Delboy - well Carl - is a delusional South London loser who has irrational faith in his own abilities. Only his brother Danny, played with just the right degree of barely restrained frustration by the pick of the actors (and even greyhound) on show, Joe Armstrong, can keep him on track.

Carl has created a four-man, dog-racing syndicate, a leg each, as a university fee insurance policy for his children. They are long gone with his adulterous wife and must view their educational prospects as limited unless Mum can find some cash.

The syndicate all work together fixing cars at the local yard. Its other members include the backward Chalky and bulky father of five Lionel, the latter resplendent in massive red England soccer shirt and parka.

The excitement builds as the group awaits the last member Rick, and their trip to see Sharkey's Necklace's first race. The tone changes completely with the arrival of mean Paul, the foreman and surprise fifth member of the syndicate.

Paul (David Hounslow) is a very unhappy man. His teenaged child has been "raped" in the front garden under his nose. His mood is murderous.

When Paul's suspicions fall on the never-seen Rick, we move to the bedroom while the action takes place out of sight in the living room where we had been before a brief scene-changing interval.

The temperature keeps rising despite Carl's ineffectual attempts to tame the prowling Paul. Eventually, out of sight, we enter a disturbing world rather like that created by Martin McDonagh in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (which also featured Trevor Cooper who plays Lionel).

On Michael Vale's set, which wonderfully combines auto lot and dowdy one bedroom flat, a real greyhound appears bringing a shocking reminder of what one emasculated homophobe amongst many is capable of doing to protect his psychopathic prejudices.

The comedy can irritate if you aren't a fan of the Trotters and the plotting isn't always coherent but Matt Charman has a distinctive voice that will be heard in future. He will have to decide before too long whether he wants to pursue fame and a possible small fortune writing sitcoms or look to the theatre in a more serious way.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)