

# British Theatre Guide

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

## Tarantula

Philip Ridley

Katy Lipson for Aria Entertainment

Southwark Playhouse

30 April–1 May 2021

Philip Ridley's new play is a 1¾-hour monologue that gets powerful non-stop performance from Georgie Henley as Toni, who begins by telling us about the night that she went out with Michael. They met when his mum was the caterer for her school's annual tea party for pensioners and he was there helping her. It was her first date, if you can call it a date when that word hadn't been mentioned.

The smoothie bar she suggested they go to wasn't open so they went to McDonald's, not what either would have chosen. That didn't stop them enjoying being together, their hands edging closer across the table—but it was there that she saw the guy with the spider tattoo on his neck and they left to go strolling together.

That lead to her first kiss and her decision to take a path where they could feel less public. It is a delightful study of teenage self-discovery and shared feeling but this is Ridley so, not surprisingly, things are suddenly much darker.

There have already been moments when the action has frozen; not a technical hitch in the streaming but a hint at a post-traumatic problem still present as becomes more apparent with their recurrence.

Only gradually do we learn what actually happened and what followed with Toni changing from the bookish would-be journalist set on getting to Oxbridge to a different personality with new aspirations.

Georgie Henley not only tells Toni's story but plays all the people she has conversations with: Michael and his mother, her parents, her brother Mad, the owner of the gym where Mad and she work, an old lady who is a client and her family. Even short interjections have a strong sense of personality.

Director Wiebke Green uses no setting in the Southwark Little studio. Toni is a lone figure in a black space but lighting gives this a theatrical atmosphere in which her physicality and frequent close-ups provide animation. While the form overall is an intimate sharing, Toni is sometimes overcome by what she is trying to handle and Henley handles these outbursts superbly in a performance that can shift instantly from intimacy to explosive panic.

In recounting Toni's story, Ridley not only gives a picture of youthful aspirations for love and for purpose and of the shadow that fear casts but a glimpse into a succession of other lives and provides this young actress an opportunity to deliver an outstanding performance.

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)