

# British Theatre Guide

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## Telstar - The Joe Meek Story

Nick Moran

K2 Productions

New Ambassadors

(2005)

*Telstar*, named after the communications satellite launched by the Americans in 1962, became a worldwide hit record for the Tornados that made producer Joe Meek's career. It's no accident that playwright Nick Moran chose something that was supposed to be a big communications asset as the title of a play that is essentially about loneliness and isolation.

The action begins in 1961 in the flat rented by independent record producer, Joe Meek (we could guess the date from the old radio which trotted out things like Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you" speech, so flashing the years up in front of us as well as a little bit of overkill). Meek is on the cusp of changing from an unknown impoverished producer with a dream into one of the big names on the burgeoning 1960s music scene. We sympathise with the session musicians who bear the brunt of his determination and with his landlady (played by Linda Robson) who has to cope with the noise.

From the outset, the cast sets an energetic pace. The play is humorous and light-hearted to begin with. Joe is an obvious eccentric who insists on recording the singers in the toilet in order to achieve the trademark echo, with the result that the musicians have to use the facilities in a local café. There is plenty of fun as Joe bullies the musicians into getting the right sound. And the script is peppered with inevitable witticisms such as his less than prescient comments about how rubbish The Stones and The Beatles were.

Joe is a difficult character to portray - part camp homosexual, part obsessive genius, complete misfit. Con O'Neill was an inspired choice because although he was capable of hitting the humorous moments, there's an unmistakable hard edge to his performance which sets up the later tragic violence. He's good at moving the audience too: we really feel for him when we learn he's been arrested for "importuning" at a public convenience in the days when it was a crime to be gay.

Linda Robson's role was rather more thankless. For most of the script she was basically just entering to complain about the noise/lack of rent/unsavoury characters Joe was attracting to her flat, and therefore her demise came somewhat out of the blue.

There is a good supporting cast including Joseph Morgan as the amoral pretty-boy Heinz to whom Joe gives his heart, and who turns exceedingly nasty when the bubble bursts. Gareth Corke gives a gripping performance as Joe's song-writing partner, ultimately spurned by Joe. Callum Dixon played three very different parts including Screaming Lord Sutch and a hapless drummer that Joe almost shoots because he was playing badly! The director, Paul Jepson, achieved a good sense of the time and place. On occasions though, O'Neill's back was turned away from the audience at crucial moments when we really needed to see his reactions.

So the question really is: does Joe Meek really merit a whole play about his life? Well, yes and no. As his career was cut off before it had really got going, he was never going to be interesting from the point of view of his fame alone. As a study of the thankless taskmaster that is the music business, it certainly has a contemporary relevance. Joe's struggle in hiding his sexuality from the media took its toll and his descent into drugs and depression was inevitable; but what sets his story apart was the ending of a life that had played no part in his downfall. I'd like to have seen Moran develop a more interesting relationship between Joe and his landlady, which would have made Joe's drastic actions all the more poignant.

A word of warning - anyone who goes expecting a nostalgic sing-a-long of Sixties hits is going to be sorely disappointed. Even *Telstar* itself is played only fleetingly. The Joe Meek story represented the worst casualties of the Sixties and no amount of music could alleviate that.

*J.D. Atkinson [reviewed](#) this production at York Theatre Royal*

**Reviewer:** [Bronagh Taggart](#)