

British Theatre Guide

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The Agent

Martin Wagner
Trafalgar Studios
(2007)

There's always a danger when luvvies start writing about the frustrations of being a luvvie that, somewhere along the line (and more often than not, in the first scene), they will lose their audience. The thing is that being an actor, an artist, a musician or, as in Martin Wagner's new play, a writer, may be trying, but then again so are many other jobs, and you don't see many plays about the career-frustrating moments of not very good doctors, teachers or bin men. If you did, the writer would at least realise that something would have to happen to the not very good doctor, teacher or bin man in order to keep the audience interested. And herein lies the danger - luvvies, you see, think that just being a luvvie is inherently interesting. And to an audience of non-luvvies, for 70 minutes in a darkened room, it just isn't.

This isn't to say that Wanger's play about struggling second-novelist Stephen and his unscrupulous agent Alex doesn't have its strengths, just that it doesn't always play to them. The central plotline (author blackmails agent into auctioning book) and its characters feel like devices from which to hang Stephen's *angst*-ridden gripes about "being a writer". And don't these people have lives outside Alex's office? Alex has a wife, a lover and twin boys; Stephen a (doubtless long-suffering) wife and children, all of whom are dealt with so briefly as to seem barely credible.

The cast put in sterling, if not stirring, performances. William Beck's agent, Alexander, is all charming, heartless charisma and Stephen Kennedy's spot-on comic timing and puppy-dog eyes make him the perfect pawn in Alexander's wily game. There is at times an odd tension between Beck's slightly restrained, TV-style acting and Kennedy's more theatrical style, either of which could work well, but which do not always play well off each other. A couple of odd conventions (for example, cast turning stage-crew on an otherwise naturalistic, sitcom-style set) also detract from the slickness of the world of Alex's seat-of-power office.

In essence, while the writing is fluent and credible and the performances stong, *The Agent* could have retained its central plot while also being so much more - a truly comic satire of the ridiculous nature of the publishing business; a political statement on the state of British culture; a story of hubris and personal tragedy. As it is, it more than happily passes 70 minutes, but I hope a sharper rewrite is on the way. Both writer and actors clearly have it in them.

Until 18 August 2007

Reviewer: [Louise Hill](#)