

British Theatre Guide

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The Ashes

Michael Pinchbeck
Nottingham Playhouse
(2011)

Cricket is a subject that's had little opportunity to make a big score on the stage. In fact the number of times the game's been represented in theatrical productions is fewer than the number of balls in an over.

Richard Harris caught the imagination with his comedy *Outside Edge* while Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber came to the crease with their musical *Cricket (Hearts and Wickets)* but it had only three innings - all private performances. Now Michael Pinchbeck has come up with a new play about one of his passions.

Nottingham Playhouse is looking to attract new audiences to its shows and hopes *The Ashes* will bring in people who wouldn't normally go to the theatre. It's hoping to repeat the success of its 2005 play, Stephen Lowe's [Old Big 'ead in The Spirit of the Man](#), about football legend Brian Clough.

The Ashes focuses on England's 1932 tour of Australia which went down in history as one of the most controversial sporting contests of all time.

On the previous occasion the two countries had met, Don Bradman had pulverised the England attack. The England captain Douglas Jardine was determined it wouldn't happen again, so Nottinghamshire miner and fast bowler Harold Larwood was chosen to keep the Australian batsmen under control with dubious tactics.

England referred to it as leg theory; the Australians described it as bodyline. Whatever it was called, the Aussies thought it wasn't in the spirit of the game, prompting diplomatic relations between the two countries to deteriorate.

Pinchbeck's play certainly isn't wide of the mark; it has plenty of drama, sadness and pathos. There are several larger-than-life characters who really make the production come alive.

Karl Haynes is excellent as Larwood, gaining sympathy for his loyalty to his captain and obeying orders, even though it led to his being called "the wrecker" and being barracked wherever the team played. Haynes looks the part and his performance is just as impressive as his role in Laura Lomas' [Wasteland](#) which I saw at Derby's Assembly Rooms two years ago.

Jamie de Courcey gives a convincing display as ruthless Jardine who'll do anything to win. He gives such a rousing speech to his players before the first Test match that you're rooting for him to succeed, no matter how dodgy the approach.

There's solid support from the rest of the cast, in particular Robin Bowerman who, as England tour manager Pelham "Plum" Warner, has the unenviable job of apologising to the Aussies; and Paul

Trussell as eccentric former player Frank Foster who hatches the winning strategy with Jardine.

Playhouse artistic boss Giles Croft pays great attention to detail, particularly in the cricketing practice sessions. Daniel Hoffman-Gill captures bowler Bill Voce's awkward action superbly.

The Ashes passes the test on many levels, although I wasn't totally bowled over by it. Howzat? Anyone with only a limited interest in cricket may be stumped by the amount of cricketing terminology. The integral newsreel footage - let's face it, in those days the camera work was dreadful by today's standards - doesn't present a lucid account of the games. There are also plenty of Nottinghamshire references which could have limited appeal for people outside the county.

But if you're a Nottinghamshire cricket fan you won't be on a sticky wicket with The Ashes and it'll probably hit you for six.

"The Ashes" continues until 17th September

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)