

The Critics | Theatre



■ Stephen Campbell Moore as a man possessed at the Almeida Theatre Picture: Johan Persson

Five star thriller back in Tiananmen Square

Story of man who stopped tank revealed

CHIMERICA

Almeida Theatre, Almeida Street, N1

★★★★★

The Almeida and the innovative touring company, Headlong, have combined to present this amazing production, ingeniously directed by Lyndsey Turner.

Mysterious, fascinating, complex, uncontrollable, and perhaps ultimately disastrous, *Chimerica*, is the offspring of the love-hate relationship between China and America.

It crashes noisily onto the stage with a speed and panache which never flags for the three or more hours of its length.

The set, designed by Es Devlin, consists of a huge, revolving cube onto which a series of magnified photographic contact sheets are projected.

This whirls the action

through scene after scene, accompanied by sound (Carolyn Downing) and lighting (Tim Lutkin) that assaults the senses with a force that exactly matches the mood of Lucy Kirkwood's action-packed thriller of a play.

Researched

It is unsurprising that this play took six years to write: it has been thoroughly researched and includes fascinating nuance and detail.

The central story is that of a photographer, Joe Schofield, played with driven and exasperating intensity by Stephen Campbell Moore, and his troubled and sensitive Chinese friend Zhang Lin, perceptively interpreted by both Andrew Leung (as a youth) and Benedict Wong (in maturity).

Early in his career, Joe photographs the frail young man, carrying a plastic bag, who stood in front of a tank

in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Who was he? Why was he there? What happened to him? Twenty-three years later, after coming across a newspaper article suggesting that the Tank Man is still alive, he determines to find him.

In the process, he loses his job, his British girlfriend (movingly played by Claudie Blackley), puts Zhang Ling in mortal danger and causes incomparable collateral damage.

The writing, throughout the layers of sub-plots and political innuendos, is witty and insightful.

In September, Rupert Coold, current artistic director of Headlong, will take over as the new artistic director of The Almeida.

This bodes well for the future programme at the theatre.

Until July 6.

Jill Truman



■ The quartet ensemble cast make excellent work of depicting a number of characters

Cowboys' tale is unexpectedly moving one

THE CHICAGO COWBOY
Rosemary Branch Theatre,
Shepperton Road, N1

★★★☆☆

The Chicago Cowboy is based loosely on the lives of director Leah Townley's grandparents and scripted by Katherine Pierce.

Amid a backdrop of tea dresses and jazz, we are introduced to protagonist Sam Rosenberg, family man, self-made businessman and self-styled "kosher cowboy", portrayed by Lloyd Morris as an engaging, cheeky, affable sort.

The scene is 1930's Chicago and Sam has employed a black man from Mississippi, Earl (Marcus Adolphy) as manager of his downtown hotel.

Earl clearly has the magic touch and the hotel begins to flourish as fashionistas and high society are drawn to the atmosphere created, in

no small part by lobby pianist Joe's jazzy riffs.

Sam enjoys a happy family life with his wife Doris (Jodyanne Richardson) and daughter Alice (Elisa King).

As the play progresses we watch Alice grow from a child to a sophisticated young woman and witness Doris as the loving, supportive wife throughout.

Sam also spends time with his rodeo friends, who provide a light-hearted respite from some of the heavier themes.

Versatile

The quartet ensemble cast make excellent work of depicting a number of characters throughout the show and the talented Elisa King proved particularly versatile.

The Chicago Cowboy is hindered by a number of unfinished stories.

Sam and Doris try unsuccessfully to help a Jewish

family in Europe to escape, lobby pianist Joe leaves to fight in the war; Earl has flashbacks of his struggle as a black man in Mississippi, the Rosenbergs move to a new neighbourhood.

However at the same time these snippets provide snapshots that reflect the era and give us a bit more detail about our characters.

At its core, this isn't a story about post-prohibition race and politics. It's a story about family, love and friendship.

Throughout, the family unit is effectively used to engage the audience and although there does not appear to be any real "storyline," our eventual familiarity with the characters ensures that the final scenes are heart wrenching and touching to watch.

An unexpectedly moving play.

Jenisa Altink-Thumbadoo

Dinner dishes up racism under polite veneer

DISGRACED

Bush Theatre, Uxbridge Road, W12

★★★☆☆

There's something very unsettling about the Pulitzer prize-winning play *Disgraced* – not least because I saw it the same day as the Woolwich killing.

The hard-hitting and well-acted play, uses the veneer of a civilised dinner party to show how racism and prejudice are bubbling underneath the surface of polite civilised society.

It takes a look at Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and racial prejudice among the professional and intellectual elite and tries to explore the roots of Islamic extremism.

The party has been organised by beautiful all-American Emily, at the request of secular Jewish gallery owner Isaac, who is going to let her know if her artwork, which is heavily influenced by Islamic art, will feature in an exhibition he is organising. Also attending is Emi-

ly's husband Amir – a Pakistani-American who has divorced himself from his Muslim identity and pretends he's Hindu because he detests the faith and wants to get ahead in his career and become a partner in a Jewish law firm – and Jory, an African-American woman, married to Isaac and Amir's colleague.

As an innocuous conversation about art unravels into a conversation with overtones of racism, the night is irretrievably torn apart by the discovery of an affair between Isaac and Emily and the fact that Jory has been promoted to partner above Amir as his employers have found out he has lied about his identity.

As Amir's bright future crashes around him, his nephew Abe – who is seen to have enthusiastically adopted everything American – is shown to be embracing an anti-American and pro-extremist attitude at the end. When asked why, he tells his uncle that if someone like



■ Hari Dhillon and Kirsty Bushell Picture: Simon Kane

Amir, who he has always emulated can't "make it" in US then there's no hope for him. Although the play suggests disenfranchisement leads to this sudden change, it is not credible as the play does not show Abe's character gradually evolve.

Amir's character also lacks credibility as a self-loathing Muslim who confesses to feeling pride at seeing the Twin Towers fall during dinner. Akhtar's play is a clever attempt to get under race and extremism, but falls short of the mark.

Syma Mohammed