

THEATRE REVIEW | **ROOTS / LOOK BACK IN ANGER**

★★★★☆ | THE ALMEIDA, LONDON

**MARY CONWAY** relishes the revival of two classics for the naked expression of truthful thoughts and class anger

**T**HE era of the angry young man. The 1950s. All seems so long ago. But if you're wondering why to revisit them now, the Almeida will tell you, as they bring us two towering classics tuned to the modern age.

Performed in rep at the Almeida until November 23, Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (★★★★☆) and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (★★★★☆), in symbiosis together, hold an unassailable position in the history of British theatre.

The Osborne play came first in 1957, overturning with one blow the complacent post-war theatrical world of camp, middle-class, predictable drama and replacing it with a fierce, working-class realism in which the protagonist rails with unfettered fury against the world he resentfully inhabits. It possesses all the fervour of socialism, not through dogma, but through the bitter energy that is a source of activism, and which introduced the 1960s before they had landed.

In *Roots* – the second play

of Wesker's Trilogy, staged in 1959 – another volcano of rage is about to erupt as the articulated concept of socialism makes its first waves in a family of downtrodden agricultural workers.

Both plays overturn the status quo and replace complacency, and – in the case of the working classes – subjugation, with collective freedom and fierce resistance. They ring out to us in the 21st century with a call to arms, refuting what the powers-to-be tell us, challenging a life of falling living standards and general belittlement of the ordinary citizen, and inciting us to think anew. The Almeida has brought us these two plays in a mood of reverence. So how do they stack up?

Both plays, in these productions, take place on a bare, revolving stage against the backdrop of a hard, grey wall, damaged by time. Both plays are cast from the same pool of actors. Both plays work around an occasionally exposed central, grave-like cavern into which bodies disappear and from which living beings

emerge. Both plays boldly display their theatrical artifice with the cast moving furniture, handing each other props and gazing through imaginary windows. This is theatre as far from the polite drawing room comedy as you could wish.

But the two works have different directors and differ in tone. *Roots*, as directed by Diyan Zora, immerses us in the relentless, slow-burn life of a Norfolk family. Wonderfully real and wonderfully recognisable to all of us who left our roots to find a different (better?) existence only to return to find nothing has changed, it's a perfect scenario, revealing not only the terrible oppression of poverty but how hard it is to throw it off.

Hope lies in Beatie who returns from London spouting the language of socialism through words she barely knows, words planted in her by a would-be intellectual who sees her as the perfect acolyte. While Morfydd Clark lights up the character of Beatie, and Deka Walmsley as her father weighs down the stage with the load he carries, this feels like a



GAME CHANGER: Billy Howle (Jimmy) and Ellora Torchia (Alison) in *Look Back in Anger*

stripped-down version, the text edited and some of the intense domestic detail skipped.

In the hands of Atri Banerjee, on the other hand, *Look Back in Anger* is given its head, speaking volumes. And though it's traditionally hard to find charm in Jimmy Porter as he rants his way around the stage mouthing thoughts supplied by the author, Billy Howle gives

him vigour and oomph. Though critics may carp at Jimmy's bitterness and misogynistic slant, the sheer powerhouse of language he employs to turn the conventional on its head is a thundering game changer.

Slightly lacking is the more tender angle – and there is little or no chemistry between Jimmy and the two female characters in the play which

is a shame – but it's still an awesome piece, refreshing in its naked expression of truthful thoughts and class anger.

This is an impressive team effort from the Almeida and still, after all these years, a wake-up call.

■ Both plays run until November 23. Box Office: 020 7359 4404, almeida.co.uk

BOOK REVIEW | **UNLEASHED**

BORIS JOHNSON | WILLIAM COLLINS, £30

JAB reviews Boris Johnson's memoir



GIG REVIEW | **TOM ROBINSON BAND 2024**

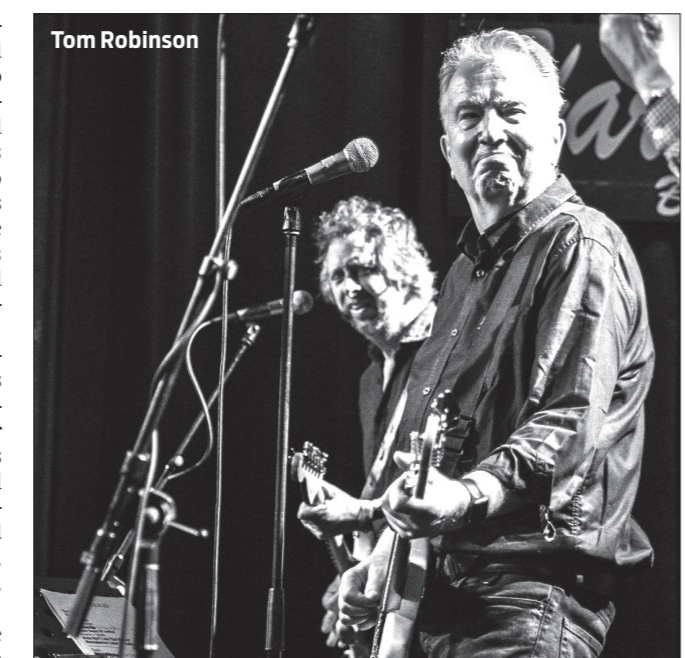
★★★★★ | VOODOO ROOMS, EDINBURGH

**ANGUS REID** time-travels back to times when Gay Liberation was radical and allied seamlessly to an anti-racist, anti-establishment movement

**W**HEN he speaks, Tom Robinson brings the seasoned urbanity of the Radio 6 DJ to proceedings, full of self-deprecating charm and well crafted anecdote, but when he steps into the playlist of his first two albums, *Power In The Darkness* and *TRB2*, like a miracle, the snarling righteous punk of his 1970s self erupts undimmed and as devastatingly on message as ever.

If anything, the raspy half-sung half-howled timbre of his 74-year-old voice suits these distillations of anger even better than before and the effect is astonishing: you time-travel back to years in which Gay Liberation was radical and allied seamlessly to an anti-racist, anti-establishment movement, brimming with power.

It's a salutary shot in the arm and a reminder that there was a time before identity politics crystallised and the only "identity" worth assuming was to be working class and confident in collective ability to change a world you hated. As a consequence, the call for solidarity implicit in *Up Against The Wall*, *Blue Murder*, *Let my People Be* or *Days of Rage*; the sheer threat of *Long Hot Sum-*



mer; and the eerie premonition of class warfare in *The Winter Of '79* are as much of a wake-up call now as then. These are tight and belligerent arrangements with anthemic, sing-along choruses and lyrics lifted – it seems – from newsprint. This is the soundtrack to years of weak Labour govern-

ment and strong unions, and to reopen the time capsule right now is a relevant and political act more than repaid by its ecstatic reception, by the presence of *Love Music Hate Racism*, and by the explicit anti-Reform message that would never pass on the airwaves. The curiosity comes when

he revives later hits like *Never Gonna Fall In Love Again* (1979) and *War Baby* (1983) and you feel the capacity to contextualise and politicise the music diminishing in favour of narrow-focus gay themes, great as those songs are. Tom Robinson is the barometer of a changing culture, and few gigs immediately invite historical and political analysis like this one.

But the sheer joy with which the Scottish audience took to *Sing If You're Glad To Be Gay*, bitterly sarcastic as it is, needed to be experienced to be believed. This is no plea for tolerance and understanding, but ferocious, aggressive solidarity. Written when homosexuality was still a criminal act in Scotland, the mighty hollering of an audience old enough to remember was a unique act of historical revenge, its rage entirely justified and cathartic, and an example to the under-50s.

Much more than a curiosity, and for a reminder of the dialectical class-literate song-writing that flourished amidst punk, this tour is unmissable.

■ On tour until October 23. For more information see: tomrobinson.com



EXHIBITION REVIEW | **KEN KIFF – A HUNDRED SUNS**

★★★★★ | THREE HIGHGATE, LONDON

Here comes the Sun King

JAN WOOLF revels in a painter of the poetic, whose freshness emulates that of the very young

**W**ALK up the hill from Archway Tube, north London – or down from Highgate – and find the gallery Three Highgate, and the current incredible show of the late British painter Ken Kiff (1935-2001).

Born in Dagenham, east London, Kiff later studied at Hornsey School of Art, just a mile down the road. He was always his own man – linking the inner world with the outer. Don't all artists do that? Not like this. Note "the" and not "his," as there is something universal about his work. His "constellation

of mental activity" speaks to all.

A child during WWII, he later eschewed his contemporaries' obsessions with abstract painting. Let's pause on the word obsessions; his own were the stuff of paint, and how it could render the poetic on the flat surface.

His relationship with the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky is fascinating too, as both poet and painter adored the sun. Don't we all, you might say. It's primal, isn't it? Yes, but Kiff and Mayakovsky embodied the sun itself in their work rather than abstract light. These two are soul mates – sun kings. Irina Johnstone's fine transla-

tion of Mayakovsky's 1920 poem *An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky In A Summer Cottage* is reproduced in the slim hardback book accompanying the exhibition. The poem is answered by the painter Kiff as he paints many suns, and in 1977 a portrait of Mayakovsky blowing his brains out. This tragi-comic painting shows brains as people and the trail of the bullet as a slick of light.

This painting pretty well greets us as we enter the gallery. Mayakovsky in fact shot himself in the heart in 1930, but Kiff's retranslation of the suicide is like a love letter to the poet.



The book covers two other poets important to Kiff – Martha Kapos and Frank O'Hara – as they wrestle with what it is to be alive in the world.

"Fantasy," said Kiff, "is way of thinking about reality." His childlike figurative distortions are like Picasso's in the sense that the freshness of the art emulates that of the very young, which is only made until inhibition kicks in at the end of childhood.

Kiff, like Picasso could do anything he wanted. His painting also has the qualities of the early 20th century expressionists' school. A bit Fauve, a tad Blue Reiter. But Kiff didn't particularly belong to any school other than groups of Jungian thinkers and their thinking about archetypes in art.

It's always interesting as a reviewer to take along another artist. I took Jowonder, whose own work relates to Kiff's in its figuration and imaginative qualities. I asked her what she thought of the show.

"I feel like I'm seeing some real art; some rays have gone in." Jowonder, like Kiff, can be as intellectual as you like, but she added: "Unlike today's art school obsession with the intellect – all this critical analysis stuff – Kiff knew you had to drop that to follow his painterly desires."

Apparently Kiff had a virile intellect, and as fierce as the sun. Curator Alistair Hicks and author of the essay "Exult" in the show's accompanying book writes: "Kiff was an intellectual, with endless nagging doubts. He was always questioning, and his reasoning was byzantine, circuitous, forever probing, but when it came down to his paintings, he managed to conjure up those hundred (suns) in one."

As Gaston Bachelard said: "The poet does not describe, he exults." Hicks again: "Following



(L) Ken Kiff, *The Poet (Mayakovsky)*, 1977; (Above) *Man walking*, 1991. (Top) *Sun, hill, cloud and tree*, 1993

Kiff's meandering but always needle-sharp thinking can distract from the essential simplicity of individual works." I can see, then, that in the way his friend Paul Klee took his pencil for a walk – Kiff took his intellect.

And the imagination? For sure – but I feel his paintings to be more translation, like AC to DC. The paintings are open enough for you to mainline and let your soul/spirit/senses/intellect – and daft ideas like AC-DC – decide. The spiritual, by the way, is that which is not

“Fantasy is a way of thinking about reality”

matter, yet they are not particularly spiritual works in the way that Marc Chagall's and a lot of German Expressionism is. That's growing up in Dagenham for you!

His art was visionary, some times like William Blake's. His colour, forms and content have great integrity and are exciting to look at whatever your politics, or what you think art should be in a certain era. For if you look at his work this way you miss the point – and the sun.

Founded in 2021 by Irina Johnstone, Three Highgate's cultural programme extends artists' work and legacy through book publishing, cinematography, writing, artists' talks and residencies as well as art exhibitions. *A Hundred Suns* was curated by Alistair Hicks with the support of Irina Johnstone, Anna Kiff and the Ken Kiff estate.

■ Runs until January 5 2025. For more information see: threehighgate.com