Spymonkey's Moby Dick

★★★★☆

Lyric Hammersmith Off-West End

Thar she blows! *Spymonkey's Toby Park takes the helm*

Lying on his deathbed, Edmund Kean apparently said: 'Dying is easy, comedy is hard.' He had a good point. Comedy is a notoriously tricky thing to get right on stage and few companies have done it with such consistent success as Brighton-based Spymonkey. Its three previous highly acclaimed productions have all been directed by 'Mighty Boosh' associate Cal McCrystal. However, for its latest outing, a decidedly surreal and absurd take on Melville's classic tale of the sea, Spymonkey has teamed up with founder member of Theatre de Complicite, Jos Houben. The result is a triumph of madness. Looser and more chaotic than its earlier work, the whole thing is played in the excitable hinterlands of delirium.

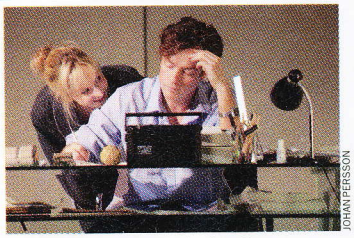
Hysterically funny from start to finish, the show is presented as a new work by Compagnie Tony Parks, a pretentious ensemble of European non-actors. This play within a play sways and staggers from disaster to catastrophe as the four actors attempt to play all the members of the crew of Ahab's doomed whaling ship, Pequod. This loose interpretation of the time-honoured masterpiece is a masterclass in physical comedy, sublime lunacy and exquisitely silly wordplay.

Aitor Basauri, Petra Massey, Toby Park and Stephan Kreiss are probably four of the greatest clowns currently working in British theatre. Singing mermaids, dancing sea anemones and a strangely moving, spectacular finale all combine to make a vaudevillian *tour de force*. *Tim Arthur*

The Real Thing

★★★★☆

Old Vic West End



JOHAN PERSSON

Hattie Morahan, Toby Stephens

Tom Stoppard's 1982 play is a dizzying construction that succeeds, almost implausibly, in accessing emotion through intellectual and theatrical complexity. In Anna Mackmin's excellent revival, it's an intricate cat's cradle of barbed wire, in which the pricking of every metal thorn is precise and acute. Lez Brotherston's white set is neat and faintly clinical; it's the site of an elegant dissection of lives that are far more messy.

Layers of invention elide in a sparklingly reflexive work that is part autobiographical, preoccupied not just with love, but with the challenges for a writer in capturing it. Henry (Toby Stephens) is a successful playwright married to waspish actor Charlotte (Fenella Woolgar). She's playing the lead in his latest creation, a drama about sexual betrayal, opposite Max (Barnaby Kay), whose wife Annie (Hattie Morahan), a third thespian, is having an adulterous affair with Henry. Annie is also an activist for Brodie, a Scottish soldier and would-be playwright imprisoned for an act of politically motivated vandalism. Henry and Annie move in together – but why can't Henry translate his feelings for Annie into the play she wants him to write for her? The nature of relationships and art come in for merciless scrutiny: when is love real? Can it withstand physical infidelity? And if bad writing like Brodie's springs from genuine passion, is it as worthless as Henry believes?

In less deft hands, this could all feel like so much clever-clever contrivance, but Stoppard plants a bloody, battered heart smack in the play's centre and Mackmin ensures that we always hear it beating. Stephens is sensational as Henry, the arrogance and archness with which he armours himself corroded by love's exhilaration and sweaty, briny anguish. His exchanges with Morahan's willowy Annie bristle with dangerous wit, and there's superb support from wry Woolgar and from Kay, whose devastation when Annie leaves him is excruciating to behold. Exquisite agony. *Sam Marlowe*

Unburied Treasures/ Strip Search

★★★☆☆/★★★★☆

Rosemary Branch Fringe

Like a Heat magazine for the stone cold, 'Unburied Treasures' exhumes apocryphal tales of celebrity corpses and spins them into a series of witty ditties. Mark Bunyan's book is a curiosity shop of posthumous peculiarites, covering everything from Evita's embalming to Inês de Castro's coronation.

However, for all Bunyan's ticklish turns of phrase and the relish of a well-balanced and characterful ensemble, it rather runs out of puff with half an hour remaining. Wry asides and contrived bickering can only sustain a show for so long and Bunyan's didactic finale, though drolly self-aware, is not quite recompense enough.

NOBBY CLARK

It makes an unusual aperitif – and, trust me, you'll need one – for 'Strip Search'. Squaddie, a former teenage rent-boy and soldier, strips to fund a gambling addiction. His increasingly fiesty monologue, which weaves through his life story, is intercut with flashes of his striptease act.

It's uncomfortable viewing, which suits well the social injustices within, though the opportunity use the act's choreography and song choices politically is missed. Titus Rowe, himself Boyz magazine's Stripper of the Year, perfectly balances boyish vulnerability with cocksure machismo. Peter Scott-Presland's text is as clever as it is outraged, making 'Strip Search' a (back, sack and) cracking piece of fringe theatre. *Matt Trueman*

The Duchess of Padua

★★★☆☆

Pentameters Theatre Fringe

Rafe Beckley's abridged production of Oscar Wilde 1883's blank-verse tragedy appears to represent the first time the play has been staged in the UK in over a century, so if you're a fan of the great Dublin wit you won't want to miss it. Not that it's particularly witty or Wildean: this tale of Renaissance realpolitik, revenge and big love is about as far removed from the sophisticated social ironies of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' as you can get.

The dramatist affects the high Jacobean manner but the results are more cold pastiche than hot homage. Shakespearean archetypes stand behind the action – especially Lady Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet – but the smoothness of the verse means Wilde's characters never burn with the knotty tormented passion of their dramatic forebears. Basically, it's Victorian melodrama.

Not that Beckley's staging is without its compensations, not least Alexis Forte's atmospheric design and Peter Gerald's hilarious turn as the Duke of Padua, a pantomime villain who glories in being hated by the ordinary folk and comes over all Marie Antoinette when the people complain that they have to drink stagnant water, exclaiming, 'They should drink wine!' It's just a pity he gets killed off before the interval. *Robert Shore*

Austen's Women

★★★☆☆

Leicester Square Theatre West End

ROBERT WORKMAN

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen's heroines enjoy an enduring appeal. The most popular of them – 'Pride and Prejudice's Elizabeth Bennet – also famously inspired monster chick-lit hit 'Bridget Jones's Diary'. It is Lizzy that emerges most persuasively from Rebecca Vaughan's solo show, which she devised from Austen's writings and performs under the direction of Guy Dartnell. In her boudoir, hair carefully curled, her be-ribboned corset hoisting her breasts up under her chin, Vaughan dresses for a Victorian summer wedding while taking a bright-eyed canter through a selection of Austen females. Aside from witty Lizzy, she also gives us a distraught Marianne Dashwood and an excitable Catherine Morland, as well as having fun with the snobberies and sourness of more peripheral characters. She's alive to the nuance in Austen's prose, and Dartnell's production has an enjoyable fluidity. But there's not quite enough variety in Vaughan's performance and the snippets of story make you long for more substance. Still, she's sufficiently good company to make this an undemanding pleasure. *Sam Marlowe*