

## ARTS



**Illuminating:**  
from left, Florence Hall, Kelly Hunter and Mark Quartley in 'Ghosts'.  
Below: Isla Blair in 'The Lyons'

Simon Annand  
Nobby Clark

**DANCE**  
**Twyla Tharp Premiere**  
Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle  
★★★★★  
**Rosie Gaynor**

Death's a-comin'... Are you ready?

If not, you might find comfort in Twyla Tharp's new work, *Waiting at the Station*, which premiered last Friday at Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Completely enjoyable, this blues ballet tells the tale of Everyman's final journey. Allen Toussaint, the R&B master, presided at the piano, playing his tunes with the orchestra, infusing the ballet with a New Orleanian magical realism. His opening chords seemed to be intoning: "Friends, let me tell you about a man who faced Death..."

That death-facing man was danced by James Moore, and the curtain opened to show him sitting in a moodily-lit, run-down 1940s train station. Over the next half-hour, he ran from three Fates, turned back his own clock, and finally - after teaching his son about life and making peace between feuding friends - jumped on to the proverbial old train.

*Waiting at the Station* feels different from Tharp's earlier work. Here, for the most part, she resists using ballet to show off feats of speed

and extreme extension; fewer starburst arms and daring lifts punctuate the phrasing. And she doesn't use the jazz to shock; Moore's jazziness is casual and graceful, unrushed and cool. The result? A more subtle energy.

True to ballet, there is no sign that what Moore is doing requires any more effort than breathing. Straightening his lapel becomes as much a dance movement as the ballet jumps of his feuding friends. Jonathan Porretta and Kiyon Gaines throw off those beautiful jumps as if they were an everyday act, like, say, straightening a lapel.

True to jazz, each main character in this work dances his own bespoke blend of ballet, jazz and popular dance. Tharp, artist-in-residence at PNB, has spent months with these dancers; she knows their movement, they know hers, and the outcome makes sense, reveals character, and tells a good story.

As part of her residency, Tharp also worked with PNB's emerging choreographers. Like the father in *Waiting at the Station*, she is passing on her life secrets to these young choreographers and making peace between feuding... dance styles. I doubt she's ready to jump on to any train though; that's just not her style.

[www.pnb.org](http://www.pnb.org)

## THEATRE

**The Lyons**

Menier Chocolate Factory, London

★★★★★

**Sarah Hemming**

A father on his deathbed; a family summoned to say farewell: surely the cue for a touching scene. Not in Nicky Silver's painfully funny play (seen on Broadway and now making its UK premiere). The New York family in his drama seem to have taken Philip Larkin's famous observation about parents and children as a directive and given it their own special twist of bilious loathing.

Rita, a well-appointed Jewish lady of certain years, sits by her husband's hospital bed ostentatiously making plans for redecorating the living room once he is dead. "I'm dying, Rita," he objects. "I know, dear. Try to be positive," she retorts. Conversation during hospital visiting hours can be strained, but these two treat it as a competition in damage infliction. As the fug of mutual loathing grows thicker, it's a relief to welcome a third party - Lisa, the couple's daughter - and then a fourth - Curtis, their son. But the apple, as they say, doesn't fall far from the tree. Lisa is alcoholic, divorced and needy; Curtis is a gay, would-be writer with a strangely elusive partner. Both ooze self-pity. Soon all four are embroiled in apportioning blame. It's clear that no amount of DIY is going to paper over the cracks in this home-life.

It's bitter stuff, acidly funny and delivered with tight timing and acute observation in Mark Brokaw's staging. But it's also sad. Silver's characters are all deeply damaged by their loveless family, but they also draw a sort of succour from it: so long as they can complain, they can avoid responsibility for themselves. And there is a healing of sorts at the end as each of them takes a modest step towards simple human contact.

It's a play about emotional legacy which has a distinguished inheritance of its own, with echoes of Edward Albee, Eugene O'Neill and Neil Simon. And in some ways, the play might have been more devastating if the characters were less extreme, less monstrously self-obsessed. But that is Silver's style and it is delivered with stinging precision here. Charlotte Randle and Tom Ellis are pitiable and infuriating as Lisa and Curtis, Nicholas Day is repellent and miserable as the father, and Isla Blair is outstanding as the scalpel-tongued mother, hiding a lifetime's wretchedness and disillusionment behind her pitiless taunts.

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