

by Patrick Marmion

**Boris Live At Five (Auditorium at Museum, Gilded Balloon, Edinburgh)**

Verdict: A tour de farce ★★★★★

**T**HE smoking battlefield of British politics is on full view at this year's Edinburgh Festival, with its skewered ambitions, blasted careers and charred reputations.

And where better to start than with the wounded Boris himself, as actor Will Barton serves up a caustic tour de farce playing the deposed PM in Jonathan Maitland's bawdy satire *Boris Live At Five*. Barton and Maitland achieve the almost miraculous feat of pleasing those who love Boris as well as those who loathe him — of whom there are a very great many in Scotland.

Nor do the creators of this mock Q&A go easy on the Scots, as Barton's dishevelled Bojo greets the Edinburgh crowd with 'Hello Glasgow!' before offering to make Scotland great... 'for the first time in its history'.

It's a seriously Chaucerian performance with one of the questions Boris plucks from a bucket asking: 'What sex position best represents your time in Government?' The idea of 'Rexit' (rejoining the EU) he likens to having a vasectomy, followed by a reverse vasectomy and then a reverse-reverse vasectomy.

And on the question of if he's been lucky with his opponents he quickly agrees, singling out 'Starmer the Embalmer'. Not only is Maitland's dialogue bluer than a Tory party conference, it's also bang up to the minute.

But it's Barton's gleefully disreputable turn as Johnson that makes this a cracker, giving Boris the full Barry Humphries/Les Patterson treatment. He leerily propositions ladies, rebukes SNP 'extremists' and asserts support for lorry drivers ('I'm HGV-positive!').

The Old Etonian gets another caning in *Boris III* (Pleasance Courtyard, ★★★★★), which imagines Johnson taking the title role in Shakespeare's tragedy *Richard III* in a chaotic (and allegedly real) school production. Boris hasn't read the play, doesn't know his lines — and has been bonking the sister of an actress who's meant to be his girlfriend.

His solemn promise beneath his blond thatch is that 'it will never happen again'. Ooh and he's in trouble for an illegal party in the dorms. Harry Kershaw makes a good fist of the teenage Boris, but this does feel like a flimsy

Vote winner: Will Barton as the outgoing Prime Minister in satire *Boris Live At Five*

# Bawdy 'Boris' vows to make Scotland great

schoolboy caper. It also lapses into a 'lessons learnt' exercise as the teacher supervising the show reminds Boris that the king cannot play the clown. Boris counters: 'They knew what I was like when they gave me the part.'

**O**N THE other side of town, Tim Walker's Remainers' lament *Bloody Difficult Women* (Assembly Rooms, ★★★★★) is a tidily rendered account of Gina Miller's legal bid to force a vote on leaving the EU during Theresa May's premiership.

Amusingly, May has forbidden mentioning the name of Boris, and he is only referred to as 'the

Foreign Secretary'. Miller comes across as decent but dull, while May comes across as dull but decent — and anyway, we know how it ends.

Dramatic interest is created instead by a profane character assassination of a former editor of this paper, which sends a hot blast of colour through the constipated corridors of power. Ironically, it's the most entertaining role, despite actor Andrew Woodall's fidgety efforts to play it down.

Talking of being lucky in your enemies, the Tories can take heart from *Exodus* (Traverse, ★★★★★), produced by the National Theatre of Scotland. Rather pathetically, they fail to lay a satirical glove on the Government in a fictional Tory leadership contest in which a

photo opp on the south coast goes wrong when a baby is washed up, Moses like, at the feet of the Home Secretary.

Although clearly modelled on Priti Patel, the real-life Home Secretary has nothing to fear from Uma Nada-Rajah's play, which fails to fully exploit the time-bomb potential of the infant she reluctantly rescues and stows away on a train back to London.

None of the characters are credible, with the possible exception of the hatchet-faced, control-freak press officer (Sophie Steer). Worse, Debbie Hannan's production looks like something out of the BBC's *Balamory*. Is this really their best shot?

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## And the best of the rest of the fest — in just 24 hours!

IF YOU have only one day at the Fringe, it's still possible to pack a lot in — even without planning. Here's how I winged it ...

First up, a morning children's show. There are some crackers this year, among them *Covid For Kids* (Pleasance Courtyard, ★★★★★), which has lots of audience participation. You can pretend to be a bogey or a nasal hair as Professor Tom Solomon (pictured below) explains all about the virus.

Then to the Traverse, for its terrific *Eavesdropping* (*Walk This Play*, ★★★★★). Download an app, don headphones and allow yourself to be guided down Edinburgh's vennels and



wynds, as tales about the city's characters unfold in your ears.

At the Gilded Balloon, I saw storyteller extraordinaire Henry Naylor in *Afghanistan Is Not Funny* (★★★★), about the war-torn country — and the lessons we've failed to learn.

Then to The Caves, where I took pot luck. It had to be *Biscuit Barrel: Wafering Heights*, an absurdist group (★★★★ for the title alone) whose proud boast is they can perform 69 sketches in one hour.

Next stop was Summerhall for *Kathy And Stella Solve A Murder!* (★★★★), a hoot of a musical whodunit about best friends who talk about grisly murders on their podcast.

VERONICA LEE

## festival 5 Your guide to what's on in Edinburgh

# Portrait of the artist as a fiery man

By Alan Chadwick

**August Wilson's How I Learned What I Learned**

Stylish snapshots of self-discovery ★★★★★

**T**HEATRE lovers will recognise August Wilson as one of the greatest US playwrights and a nuanced chronicler of the black American experience in the 20th century.

The casual Fringe visitor to this solo show, starring Lester Purry, will more likely know Wilson's work from recent Oscar contender *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Both will find much to



Engaging: Lester Purry

savour here in this portrait of the artist as a young man, and Purry carries it off with an engaging capability, style and no shortage of charm.

The show is essentially a memoir of snapshots from Wilson's

life — the melting-pot Hill District of Pittsburgh he grew up in, an 'amalgam of the unwanted'; dropping out of school; bar-room encounters; time spent in jail; dead-end jobs; his artistic aspirations — mixed in with his thoughts on racism, and examples of the tenets and principles that formed his moral compass.

It's a self-portrait of a complicated, passionate, fiery individual trying to find his way and place in the world — one who was never slow to take a stand against prejudice.

This is the show's UK and European premiere. It's in a smallish room and the house was only half-full when I saw it. But this really does deserve to pack out for the rest of its Edinburgh run.

■ *Assembly Rooms until Aug 28*

### LOVE LOSS & CHIANTI

**C**OLD Feet star Robert Bathurst previously scored a hit at the Fringe with one part of this double bill from poet Christopher Reid. That focused on a lunchtime encounter, in a deft piece of writing. Whether the complementing section now added will top that will be up to audiences to decide. But Bathurst's crumpled heart-throb has charm to burn.

■ *Assembly Rooms until Aug 28*

### JULIA MASLI: CHOOSH!

**T**HERE isn't a pick of the Fringe that doesn't feature this solo clown-show look at migration from the 2019 Malcolm Hardee Award-winner. And while there's no denying Masli is an engaging performer, with a winning personality that can't help but get audiences on side, the hype seems overblown.

■ *Assembly Roxy until Aug 28*

### WAYNE MARSHALL PLAYS GERSHWIN

**T**HE British pianist and conductor offers classic Gershwin with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. *Dreamy Rhapsody In Blue*, Bernstein ballet score *Fancy Free* (a precursor to *On The Town*) and favourites from *Porgy and Bess* make up a programme that is not to be missed.

■ *Usher Hall, tomorrow*

### EDINBURGH BOOK FESTIVAL

**T**HE Festival's programme has something for everyone, from actor Brian Cox and comedian Kevin Bridges to award-winning authors and a theatre adaptation of David Keenan's punk homage *This is Memorial Device*. Scot lit stars appearing include Sir Ian Rankin, Irvine Welsh and Ali Smith.

■ *Edinburgh College of Art, tomorrow to Aug 29*