

DANCE by Rupert Christiansen

Still youthful at nearly 90

Modern dance companies come and go, reputations rise and fall, but Rambert, founded in 1926, goes on for ever, always the brand leader. Part of the reason for its status is its crack corps of superlative dancers.

But it's also due to a repertoire not restricted to one fashionable choreographer, and a wise balance between classics and novelties.

The current *Labyrinth Of Love Tour* (until November 30; and February-April 2013) ★★☆☆ spans a revival of Niijinsky's sensational *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, dating from 1912, and the world premiere of a piece by Marguerite Donlon.

This is *Labyrinth Of Love* itself. The programme calls it 'a mirror of life, a journey through emotions'. Ignore all that pretension: where it scores is as a gorgeous floor show, with imaginative video by artist Mat Collishaw and sexy white costumes by Conor Murphy, in which Donlon's sensual choreography plays only a decorative role.

A singer, Kirsty Hopkins, wanders across the stage, carolling Michael Daugherty's settings of romantic and erotic poems by Sappho, Emily

Dickinson, Anne Carson and others. But as one can barely distinguish any of her words, the theme of the 'labyrinth of love', or the relationship between text and movement, barely registers.

Far less visually arresting but more deeply satisfying is Paul Taylor's *Roses*. Dating from 1985 and danced to Wagner's orchestral suite *Siegfried Idyll*, this is a grave piece in which ten soberly costumed dancers move in harmony, forming a kaleidoscope of patterns.

When Wagner's music ends, an adagio to clarinet and strings by Heinrich Baermann segues in, and another couple, dressed in a dazzling white, emblematic of spiritual purity, dance an elegiac *pas de deux*, beguilingly executed by Angela Towler and Kirill Burlov.

Are they ghosts or angels? Taylor isn't telling, and the openness of that question is part of *Roses'* haunting power.

The tour also includes works by Merce Cunningham, Richard Alston, Javier De Frutos and the company's current artistic director, Mark Baldwin. It's not to be missed.

THEATRE



Georgina Brown

The River
Royal Court Theatre,
London

1hr 20mins

★★★★★

55 Days
Hampstead Theatre,
London

2hrs 45mins

★★★★★

Everything about Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem* was stunning: its wild originality, its language; the extreme yet wholly convincing characters; Ian Rickson's remarkable staging in a beech forest, including live chickens. Butterworth's new play, *The River*, could scarcely be more different in every way except its quality, which, once again, is dazzling.

A tense psychological thriller and a haunting ghost story, *The River* also has fish – in one scene a large trout is gutted and expertly stuffed with herbs, before being drizzled with oil, cooked and eaten – along with tales of successful catches ('like catching a lightning bolt') and the slippery ones who got away.

It reels you in and keeps you hooked long after you've left the theatre, but exactly what happens – what is real, what is fantasy – remains as elusive and as tantalising as the shyest, most silvery sea trout.

Staged in the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, the cosy 90-seater attic space, the setting created by the designer Uitz is a dreamy cabin in the woods. Here, a bearded man (Dominic West), passionate about fishing to the point of obsession, has brought his blonde girlfriend (Miranda Raison).

The woman (none of the characters is named) hates fishing, but it seems he must have persuaded her to go to the river with him, because when he returns to the cabin alone he rings the police to report her missing.

Suddenly a beautiful woman with raven hair (Laura Donnelly) steps into the cabin but there is no acknowledgement on stage that this female character is different. The scene simply resumes.

It is a brilliant and startling theatrical trick, which is repeated several times, so that the play effectively interweaves two separate love affairs which have both followed a spookily similar course. And with it comes an uncomfortable



REEL LIFE: Dominic West as the angler in *The River*, with co-star Miranda Raison

IF YOU LIKE THIS WHY NOT TRY

Nick Payne's *Constellations*, at the Duke of York's Theatre, London.

DONALD COOPER

Two-timer West is the catch of the season

torrent of ideas about the way people conduct their different love affairs, staging the same seductions, using the same phrases, giving the same love token – in this case, a shiny stone the size and shape of a heart.

In other words, the man is just like the sea trout which return to the same place year after year to spawn, bigger and stronger every time, 'unless they get caught'.

Ian Rickson's compelling production

is dark and glistening as the deepest of rivers. West is superb: his initially attractive, bright-eyed and boyish excitement for fishing becomes, gradually, something disturbing and excessive. For a second I saw a flicker of one of his most recent roles, *Fred West*.

Tickets for *The River* go on sale every morning online and at the theatre. It's well worth queuing for.

'We are not just trying a tyrant, we are inventing a country,' says Oliver

Cromwell in Howard Brenton's new play, *55 Days*, which goes back to 1648 to explore the only military coup that has ever happened in English history.

Cromwell and his supporters have had enough of a dictatorial King Charles I, who, in their opinion, has ignored the wishes and needs of Parliament and the people and then waged Civil War against them. The Army has occupied London.

'We closed the theatres. We'll close him,' they threaten. Director Howard Davies

has had the striking idea of putting the King in full and fancy Cavalier costume while everyone else has a short back and sides and wears Forties three-piece suits, the antithesis of extravagance. Everyone, that is, except Cromwell, whose dark grey shirt and no tie give him the look of an off-duty vicar.

It makes Brenton's point – as well as Cromwell's – loud and clear: that Charles, with all his talk of the divine right of kingship, is in every sense an anachronism, out of time and out of touch.

While Brenton's King is nothing like as complex or moving a figure as Shakespeare's Richard II, this is a very similar story and a fascinating case of history repeating itself.

There is a cast of dozens, but it is essentially a two-man show. Mark Gatiss is terrific as a haughty, spoilt and scornful king. His Charles has a Scottish accent and an occasionally striking turn of phrase. He calls the rebel Presbyterians 'disgusting little men' with 'appalling clothes, black cloth, strong body odour, spittle down their fronts from too much preaching...'

And Charles is impressively astute when under trial. Douglas Henshall is a charismatic and clever Cromwell bristling with religious fervour.

While there is some good drama in the courtroom, only one scene in *55 Days* gets momentarily beneath the skins of these two cold, equally unsympathetic men: Brenton imagines a private meeting (which never happened) when Cromwell attempts to persuade the King to agree to a 'settlement' and so keep his head.

Otherwise, this play is a little bit of a slog.

ALSO PLAYING by Simon Murphy

Making ageing fun, frisky... and 74 other F-Words

'DARE I say it, I still get frisky', admits Libby McArthur, sparking roars of laughter. A broad smile appears on the red-head's face as she wanders across the stage with a mischievous air.

This is Ms McArthur, who is best known for playing Gina in BBC Scotland's soap, *River City*, at her daring best explaining to a theatre full of ladies why turning 50 isn't the end.

Her new one-woman show, *The F Word* – not to be confused with Gordon Ramsay's programme of the same name – aims to comically reveal that growing old doesn't mean growing boring.

The first half of the show consists of a 40-minute scripted routine in which Ms McArthur explains how life at 50 is 'fabulous

Libby McArthur's The F Word

On tour

★★★★★

and fascinating, fun, fashionable, fit, as well as frustrating, fading, farcical, faulty, feeble and feverish'.

The show forms part of Scotland's creative ageing festival, a nationwide programme of arts activities celebrating growing old.

Ms McArthur – who is actually 51 – bounces around the stage in front of four banners with 76 F words (yes, I counted). The performance definitely found its audience at the Arts Guild theatre

in Greenock, Renfrewshire, but the subject matter might not be everyone's cup of tea. At times, the barrage of F words also feels a little forced.

The second half of the show is an altogether more relaxed affair. Rather than racing around the stage, Ms McArthur is seated with a glass of water taking questions from the audience. Here, she is at her best.

In talking about her career, she is able to weave in narratives from her childhood in a housing scheme in Castlemilk, Glasgow, where she grew up as one of eight children.

She fondly recalls 'a rare occasion' when, aged ten, she was taken to a park at 10pm on a freezing cold night for an ice

cream. The laughter flows with each anecdote.

Recalling growing up as a 'good Catholic girl', one of her funniest stories is a recollection of being ordered by her mother to pray for a boy called Johnny whose advances she rejected as a young girl.

And my, my, the ladies loved it. 'That's made my night,' said one particularly excited old woman after posing for a picture with the River City

ANECDOTES: Libby McArthur reveals how to grow old disgracefully



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