

The Arts

Trooper to Cooper

THEATRE

Jus' Like That

Garrick

Bruce Dessau

RECENT British theatre has a penchant for probing the underbelly of this country's iconic comics. Following Cleo, Camping, Emmanuelle and Dick and The Play What I Wrote, Tommy Cooper now joins the roll-call. This unashamedly lightweight tribute only briefly dwells on the intriguing dark side of laughter, but is hugely enjoyable none the less.

Comedy buff John Fisher's simple narrative recreates some of the loveable buffoon's finest routines, which bookend a single backstage scene illuminating his less fêted antics. He liked a tippie and was a prodigious pill-popper. There was also a mistress, Mary, a surrogate wife/manager.

Hefty praise must go to Jerome Flynn, who leads with a prominent jaw. Apart from sporadic high-kicking from a sextet of stocking-clad dancers this is his show. It is a long way from Soldier, Soldier to solo in the West End, but he convincingly pulls off the metamorphosis from trooper to Cooper. At times, particularly after the interval, he seems to inhabit this gentle giant's ill-fitting skin, stumbling dazed as his tricks fall apart. Flynn is a stripling compared with his character's guardsman build, but thanks to padding is no mini Cooper. The only thing lacking is the despairing stare. Flynn is more amiable than alienated.

The gigs are re-enacted brilliantly. One-liners, rubber birds, flowers and spotted hankies pour forth in a torrent. The tempo is varied by longer set-pieces. Flynn is good at everything from genuine magic to fall-about hoofing. His timing has an instinctive precision that could not be learnt from books.

The side is briefly let down by the dramatic filling in the vaudeville sandwich. What John Fisher does not know about variety is not worth knowing, but Flynn's lines here tend to plod. Emotional baggage is never fully unpacked. The midwife rejected this misfit, but he survived on brandy and condensed milk. Later, military service



Alastair Muir

Jerome Flynn as Tommy Cooper: at times he seems to inhabit this gentle giant's ill-fitting skin, stumbling dazed as his tricks fall apart

must have scarred him. His onstage death, however, is dealt with extremely well. There is a genuine poignancy before this oversized clown returns for a heavenly encore.

The bar for this distinctive sub-genre has been set high by The Play What I

Wrote. Jus' Like That! falls short but has lots going for it. Simon Callow's vigorous direction ratchets up the pace and teases out laughs in all the right places. And, most of all, Flynn's performance is heroic. To tackle a personality as big as Cooper and not

fall flat on your face is a significant achievement. In Flynn's hands Cooper knocks many modern stand-ups into a cocked hat. Or should I say fez.

● Booking until 21 June. Box office: 0870 890 1104.

Art meets commerce in a Space to watch

EXHIBITION

Pavilion

Bloomberg Space, EC2

Nick Hackworth

BLOOMBERG Space, set up a year ago, is unique in Britain: a contemporary art gallery entirely funded and housed by a single corporation. Bloomberg, the financial services company founded by Michael Bloomberg, ex-banker and current mayor of New York, has for a while now been the most committed corporate sponsor of contemporary British art. The founding of its gallery, contained within the company's trendy London HQ, is the logical extension of its strategy to create a deep association between its brand and the art world that it helps support; it has literally brought art "in house".

There is, of course, some



Celebrating colour: Fransje Killaars's Non-Stop Amsterdam (1998)

suspicion about corporate money within the superficially Left-wing and anti-capitalist art world but, that aside, the gallery has been a welcome

addition to the London art scene, staging a series of generally young, fresh, eye-catching shows with international scope.

Pavilion, a group exhibition that brings together four artists notionally linked by work that merges painting with installation, is typical and presents us with two huge murals, one gigantic abstract painting and one installation.

Though all four of the pieces are unashamedly attention-grabbing, it is the installation that is initially the most intriguing. Non-Stop Amsterdam, by Fransje Killaars, a 44-year-old Dutch artist, is a room-like structure, filled with a series of bunk-beds made up of metal struts. Swaths of brightly coloured and fluorescent, translucent materials make up the walls and ceiling and cover the beds, turning the work into an architectural celebration of the qualities of colour.

The real abstract on show, a five metres by four-and-a-half metres painting by Peter Davies, winner of last year's John Moores prize, is,

however, more successful. Interest in the installation rapidly evaporates after close inspection, but the wall-sized painting is strong enough to sustain a longer engagement. Its surface is covered with an attractive tangle of shapes, colours and depths to give some aesthetic interest, while the flatness of the acrylic paint and slightly jokey forms gently mock the pretensions of the grand old abstract tradition.

The two murals, meanwhile, situated on either side of a square balcony in an atrium, revel in their pop-culture and "street style" look, being large, brash and successful, if throwaway, pieces of decoration.

Though not an earth-shattering exhibition this time, Bloomberg Space is a gallery to watch.

● Until 3 May. Information: 020 7330 7959

Joyous Venus back in orbit at last

POP

Venus Hum

Metro Club, W1

John Aizlewood

UNUSUALLY, Venus Hum are a Nashville-based non-country band. It's an apologetic claim to fame, but it was enough to send Nicole Kidman waddling across the sticky floors of the Camden Monarch last year. Her taste in music is clearly superior to her taste in husbands. Since then, their once-heralded debut album, Big Beautiful Sky, has been delayed so often it's a wonder it will not be released by Virgin Trains.

Their momentum has evaporated so efficiently that they can only half-fill the tiny basement that is the Metro. No matter. Venus Hum rattled through their heady music without a care in the world.

Aside from perma-grinning hired violinist Jacob Watson, they looked like a cartoon. Kip Kubin wore a fetching tinfoil ensemble, while his tubby, sinister synthesiser partner, Tony Miracle, favoured a school bully's uniform.

Between them was singer Annette Streat, with her geeky spectacles, pensioner's haircut, kooky dancing and pink dress. She has been compared to the empress's new clothes herself, Björk; Streat is in a different league already.

Venus Hum oozed joyous, symphonic twists, from the dreamy opener, The Bells, to the lachrymose closer, Bella Luna. The furious single Montana, had a high-energy backbone, a pop centre and a Men Without Hats-style neo-folksiness. It sounds like a hit, but no hits sound like it. Better still, Soul Sloshing has off-kilter rapping, a heart-stealing chorus and hints of electroclash, but is still head-turningly beautiful. They lasted barely an hour; double that would have been too short.