

THEATRE REVIEW | **THE UNFRIEND**
★★★★☆ | CRITERION THEATRE, LONDON

Stranger danger

PETER MASON applauds a razor-sharp comedy of manners

A FIRST theatrical collaboration between writer Steven Moffat and director Mark Gatiss, *The Unfriend* has transferred to the West End after a successful run at the Chichester Festival Theatre, and it's easy to see why it's been given its chance on a bigger stage.

A first-rate comedy with strong elements of farce, it's predicated on the amusingly stressful contortions of a middle-aged English couple, Peter and Debbie, who end up playing unwilling hosts to a peppy and alarmingly frank American widow, Elsa, who has managed to invite herself to their comfortable suburban home for a holiday in Britain.

Soon aware that their unwanted visitor is (according to internet rumours) a murderer, they try to overcome their inherent politeness to pluck up the courage to kick her out.

Yet they can never quite manoeuvre themselves into a position to do so, and Elsa is seemingly so impervious to suggestion that there's no prospect she'll ever get the hint and disappear.

What's more, Peter and Debbie's two grumpy teenaged children, Alex and Rosie, previously at odds both with themselves and their parents, quickly take a liking to Elsa as, Mary Poppins-like, she charms them into viewing their family circumstances more positively.

Along the way there's plenty of opportunity to explore light-heartedly two cultures divided by a common language – to pit

(L to R)
Reece Shearsmith as Peter,
Frances Barber as Elsa,
Amanda Abbington as Debbie



Pic: Manuel Haitian

British reserve against American brashness, understatement against hyperbole – and with subtle nods to the recent machinations of Harry and Meghan, to contrast the buttoned-up British policy of leaving things unsaid with the touchy-feely American preference for an opening-up of hearts.

Of course a lot of this is caricatured, but it's funny nonetheless – and in fact there are some subtle departures from the stereotypes. Despite their obsession with good manners, for instance, Peter and Debbie are relentlessly and quite unconsciously rude to their boring neighbour (played with great skill by Michael Simkins), while Elsa, though insensitive on the surface, shows him far more consideration than they do.

Elsa, too, is not above a bit of dissembling, and in her own way is just as guilty as her hosts of the British habit of saying one thing while meaning another.

The best scenes arrive when Peter and Debbie build themselves up to a crescendo of self-inflicted confusion, trying desperately to avoid embarrassment. Yet there's also genuine

tension as the laughter flows, for they are so overwhelmed by their inability to break out of their behavioural straitjackets that it's impossible not to clench your fists in sympathy. "We're dying of manners" shouts Debbie at one point.

That the audience is so invested in such discomfort is down to outstanding performances from Reece Shearsmith as Peter and Amanda Abbington as Debbie, their magnificently taut interactions honed to a high pitch on the Chichester stage. Frances Barber as Elsa is, if anything, even better, sailing through the emotional chaos that surrounds her with serene imperviousness, as well as a slightly malevolent assuredness.

For Moffat and Gatiss, who have previously worked together so profitably on two TV series, *Sherlock* and *Dracula*, this is proof that their partnership can thrive outside of the small screen, and hopefully will be the first of many further theatrical joint efforts.

■ Runs until April 16 2023. Box office: 033 33 202 895, criterion-theatre.co.uk

MUSIC REVIEW | **HALF MAN HALF BISCUIT**
★★★★★ | ELECTRIC BALLROOM, CAMDEN

JAMES WALSH savours the genius of Britain's greatest living songwriter

IN CAMDEN TOWN on a cold January night, a man down the front is crying and bellowing along to the closing track of a band's sixteenth studio album: *Oblong of Dreams*, a paean to place and belonging worthy of Wordsworth.

Up on stage, Nigel Blackwell, Britain's greatest living songwriter, is an unassuming type, his genius known only to a lucky few. Half Man Half Biscuit's wonderful, warm and endearingly obsessive fan base are all here, packed like expectant sardines after drinking weak lager in a Camden boozier.

While many of their era have long since sunk into a morass of nostalgia tours, new tunes met with a rush to the bar, Nigel and the boys are more vital than ever.

This is an extraordinary achievement for a band who, if they exist in the public imagination at all, exist as a dimly remembered novelty act who wrote a couple of silly songs about football and post-punk oven gloves.

The Biscuit, as no-one calls them, only manage the trip down south occasionally, as it's a bit of a trek from The Wirral and Nigel is a home bod. The mood here is celebratory and reverential, heightened by a recent rumour that 2022's *The Votorol Years*, with its elegiac closer, is to be the band's swansong (it isn't, barring bike accidents).

Live, they are sounding better than ever, eternally held together by Neil Crossley's distinctive bass, and enlivened by new-ish guitarist Karl Benson's

melodic playing.

Twydale's Lament, off 2005's *Achtung Bono*, gets a joyous and unexpected airing: riffs, road rage, sarcasm, posties at the pub quiz, and smug couples enjoying jasmine ice cream. These three and a half minutes contain more twists and turns than most bands' careers.

Midnight Mass Murder – played at Sheffield's Offbeat last month, so officially an indie dance floor banger – is a companion piece to Vatican Broadside, and both explode into a melee of moshing and terrace chants. But there's so much more going on here than sarcasm and irreverence.

Awkward Sean, for example, is the latest in a staggering run of rich and sympathetic character studies. As with the man of extraordinary fires in *Little Of The Way Of Sunshine*, there are a lot of Awkward Seans here tonight, and I am one of them.

Other highlights include a frantic Tommy Walsh Eco

House, coupled with a story about a man being disappointed by Dignitas's breakfast options; Big Man Up Front, a hurtling spaghetti western dissection of car violence and toxic masculinity; and a cheery communal singalong of Grafting Haddock In The George.

"Age, trampling upon youth, powdered my head with the snow of fifty winters," howls Nigel, poetic as ever even during a song about pub-to-pub fish salesmen.

It is said that 99 per cent of Half Man Half Biscuit fans look like David Quantick, but this is a more age and gender mixed audience than I've seen before. Kids who grew up with the band are now old enough to pogo alongside their parents – which is much more edifying than jogging.

A near-perfect cover of I Fought The Law sends people home bouncing after a profound, life-affirming gig – full of solidarity, wisdom, silliness, and songs to plan your life around.

■ Find Half Man Half Biscuit 2023 gigs at www.hmhb.co.uk



Half Man Half Biscuit in 2015

Pic: Paul Hudson/CC

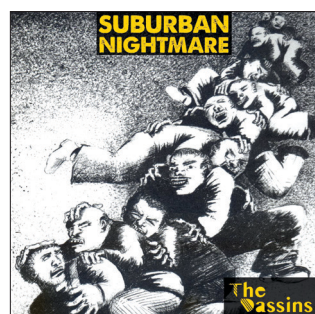
ALBUM REVIEWS WITH **MICHAL BONCZA**

The Dassins
Suburban Nightmare
(Independent)
★★★★★

QUITE unexpectedly this East Leeds-based quartet's debut album gets, thrillingly, under your skin with its very first chords. The sound lead is delivered with extraordinary confidence for bunch of lads this young.

The distinct timbre of Ewan Turner and Riley Gill's versatile voices, the excellent musicianship of all four, anchored by Edward French, rich and intelligent drumming and their spirited guitar play, which includes Jamie Hannan, energises.

The Dassins arrangements have flair and abandon spiced by inventive and melodic brief riffs such as in the brooding *Stealing Bread*:



"Self immolation they cry status frustration./ Stealing bread to get right back to my home."

There is intelligence and honesty in their handling of the hopelessness of "suburban nightmares" that will resonate with their generation. Way to go lads!

Ewan's grandad Andrew Turner chipped in with the cover design and their enigmatic name is borrowed from Jules Dassin's family.

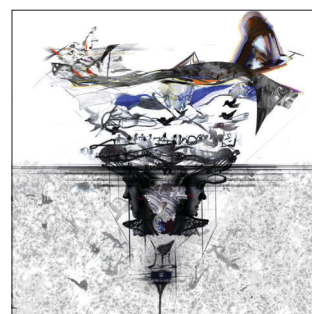
Sylvette
Single Thread
(Velveteen Records)
★★★★★

THAT the Manchester quintet Sylvette have garnered support from BBC 6 Music should not surprise – it dubbed their sound "dramatic, sophisticated and stylish," an accolade fully deserved.

They took the name from Picasso's frequent model the pottery-factory worker Sylvette.

Single Thread is the outcome of vocalist/guitarist Charlie Sinclair's experience of caring for his disabled and terminally ill father, and the subsequent loss experienced during lockdown. It is unusually honest, intimate and ultimately cathartic songwriting.

Delivered with a meditative, almost melancholy, vocal, blends of solos augmented with



vocalised choruses and mesmerising string passages *Single Thread*, *Blanket of Dust* and *Borrowed Time* absorb totally and richly reward.

The two brief interludes *Dream Diary 1* and *2* are reflective spoken word pieces accompanied by dreamy electronic sounds that offer respite but require considerable listening readjustment – not unlike like Picasso's simultaneous multi-angled vistas.

A major accomplishment.

Spear of Destiny
Ghost Population
(Easter Snow)
★★★★★

IT MAY be hard to believe that Kirk Brandon has now been leading *Spear Of Destiny* (SoD) for over 39 years and this is their 15th studio album. He also heads *Dead Men Walking*, the supergroup with a multi national line-up.

Brandon has been called "the Wagner of rock n roll" and it is easy to see why when listening to this relentless, tour-de-force oeuvre of flawless musicianship.

Rock seldom reaches such monumentality or pathos. Shine: "This is not the day to cry, this is not the day to walk with your head hung down," Neoly-



thic *By Design*, *Bread And Circuses* or *Their England* will take your breath away. These are superb and sublime anthems for our time.

Brandon explains the title: "Not acknowledging the disenfranchised [is] writing them out of existence." SoD know perfectly which side they are on.

Spear of Destiny was the "holy spear" with which Longinus pierced Jesus's side to check if he was alive.