THE SCOTSMAN
SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

Velvet

Pleasance Courtyard (Venue 33)

★★★★

"I'm a super star because I'm super at being a star," Tom, a young actor repeats, his beaming smile slowly cracking as it becomes clear that these aren't his words but ones he's been asked to perform for an advert. There's something horrible about it – but it's OK because he's agreed to be there. Isn't it?

Writer/performer Tom Ratcliffe's semi-autobiographical story of exploitation in the acting industry starts off feeling like a fun, if somewhat slight, piece that could belong to any young Fringe performer – all painful auditions, forced networking, and condescending coffees with "industry professionals".

However, as the skilfully structured writing slowly scratches and then vigorously scrubs away superficial surfaces, what lies beneath is something more sinister.

After Tom's relationship with his financially stable partner ends, he is increasingly drawn to talking to a sinister man online, who demands Tom call him "sir" and "audition". Tom, who takes his acting career seriously, and certainly doesn't want to blur his sex life with work, is initially having none of this. But as his job situation becomes increasingly desperate, he starts to persuade himself that this man is the top producer he claims – and we start to think he's right.

By the time of the #MeToo revelations, Tom has convinced himself swapping his body for a role in a Hollywood film is a necessary sacrifice, but is left broken and depressed. Yes, he is a consensual participant, but he is also there because of a flawed hierarchical structure that belittles, exploits and devalues him. It's a sad story underpinned by bleak humour and a pertinent punch-back from yet another voice in the industry asking why should we, or anyone, have to put up with this?

SALLY STOTT

Until 27 August. Today 2pm.

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THEATRE

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COMEDY

Stevie Martin Vol. 1
Pleasance Courtyard (Venue 33)
★★★

There's a preamble for Stevie Martin's debut solo showwhere she's a visual gag, bringing countless props on to the stage with her, only for them to be left unused. The feeling is that so many ideas and over-elaborate circumstances bringing it down, sending her scribbling across the floor and confronting her fears.

As a member of the sketch trio Massive Dad, Martin has proved herself an inventive and physically accomplished performer. But there's so much packed into this half-hour that it's almost overwhelming for the viewer as it is for the comic, who occasionally stumbles over her dense script. Ostensibly, the premise is that Martin is preparing an accusation of nothing, but show openings. There are showcases for varied performance skills, her playfulness with language, her commitment to the more outlandish routines and an ever-ready propensity to pull the rug away. Some are very arch, but funny indeed. And there's an appealing glimpse of her true self, now with her classic music taste to be her struggle to become a London comedy writer. But this is a show that's supposed to retrospectively frame its ideas. Martin has already rejected, with a director's commentary on a director's commentary sketch. You have to invest in it as Stevie Martin does and I just couldn't.

JAY RICHARDSON

Until 27 August. Today 6pm.

More fun than Wagner

MUSICALS & OPERA

Thor And Loki
Assembly Roxy (Venue 139)
★★★★

Wagner's Ring cycle in five and all that but if you would rather see a subversive reading of Norse mythology – where Thor (Ida Nilsen) and Loki (Ragnarr Ida) are adapted as a musical theatre romp about equality, diversity and open borders – then Thor and Loki is probably more up your fjord, and somewhat prettier in the bargain.

Well it must. Odin and his offspring are a fun casting, topped up in wrestling and American football gear and ready to defend their odious Freyja, who is gunning for the golden apples of immortality, with all the homemade props in their armoury. But their aggressive posturing sits uncomfortably with chosen child Thor, an effete pacifist whose true poetry and celebrated skills coming-of-age at 34, when he is gifted the hammer of the gods and a sizeable bony bellhop jacket.

Meanwhile, his alleged arch-nemesis Loki is a confused teenage goth brought up in a happy household where he's free to join the army or fit in but can't quite keep up with the camp dressy-rich Thor-ness of it all. When they eventually meet, they unleash the supernatural forces of a wear record or chant and join forces against the planet to oppose the befuddling of an enchanted new all (optical) and the subversion of the ordinary morals of Midgard. A long show, as there is an old-school ballyhoo routine about pacifism and a belting ballad about Loki's parentage among other slide-whistled set piece.

Thor and Loki is daft: throwaway fun but new but elevated by sparkly production values, musical theatre Valhalla in the sheer multi-talking talent of the cast of nine (5 are all mighty singers, floor-faced dancers, funny actors and multi-instrumentalists (woodwind a specialty), making them all at least a quadruple threat.

FIONA SHEPHERD

Until 24 August. Today 7.15pm.

The cast of Thor And Loki are experts at multi-tasking

THEATRE

Frieda Loves Ya!
Underbelly Bristo Square (Venue 302)
★★★

In life, there is a time for commemoration, a time for anger, a time for grief. But not in the Fringe: there is also a time for rose and cable-based nonsense and for dancing to clapping tiny ukuleles and chairs. It is this sweet, supportive hour you spend in the company of burlesque artist Frieda Love.

Frieda Loves Ya! is her whimsical and at times surreal response to what the world needs now – love we can love, since you're asking. Love (the performer; not the entomological charm at the audience instead barely with her impressive dance to Martha Wainwright's Bloody Mother F**** Ing A**hole – if that doesn't get you, the naughty rumble of bloomers added from inside a Frieda dance fancy costume will. And if you're a real hard nut, she will surely crack you with her simultaneous hula hooping/ukulele playing skills.

Love injects just enough harebrained silliness into her routines to avoid tipping into tweeness. There's a bit of a story, a quasi-one, if you care about that sort of thing. Her sidekick is an actual fruitier fancy japanese, of course, called Maryn, whose flare is surely lifted from the corner. And who knew that the right offstage dance "volunteers" in blow-in and superhero pants could be so poignant?

FIONA SHEPHERD

Until 27 August. Today 10.30pm.

COMEDY

Katie Pritchard: Tourette's In and Out
ICA Dance (Venue 261)
★★★

This show is an absolute triumph of performance over material. Katy Pritchard is a bubbling, charismatic, talented comedy joy-carriage – or rather cardiac, in a tiny venue crammed with people all of whom seemed as bemused by the relentless awfulness of her material as I.

But we were all, somehow, enjoying the odd experience behind each other.

Singing a jumble of words while thrashing crackpipe a mosquito on a parody. If an entire rock anthem only has one joke in it, how can to the joke? There is the most brilliant fifteen minutes in this hour, much of it with overtones of Raymond and Mr Tumpkins and all of it impossibly funny to anyone who lives at least a pun.

Pritchard certainly works hard and powers through her hour with many costume changes and much audience participation adding to her workload. The more I remember, the more I smile, but it was an awful lot of Sioux Falls and Beyoncé for the length they've really brought her with them. One day Katy Pritchard will have killer hour. This is not that day.

KATE COPSTICK

Until 28 August. Today, 3.45p.m.

DANCE, PHYSICAL THEATRE & CIRCUS

Brocade
Dance Base @ Edinburgh City Chambers (Venue 198)
★★

There is a moment in ballet or contemporary dance classes, when participants are asked to travel across the floor doing a series of leaps or steps. Imagine that for an hour, and you've a Brocade. The framing the space between two rows of the audience, four dancers – whose commitment is admirable – skip, romp, side-step or run. There are echoes of 1960s American postmodern dance, and occasionally the pounding of shoes on wood trusses a absorbing body of sound. Other than that, it's challenging to find anything to engage with.

KELLY APTER

Until 18 August. Today 11.55p.m.

CABARET & VARIETY

A Field of Hand-Painted Grass
Laughing Horse @ The Mash House (Venue 343)
★★★★

Bright black. "Tickets please," a man says, shining a torch in a way as to blind us. "Sit, freaks out. "Not really," he laughs. "It's a free show!"

And as such we soon see there is an ensemble in the dark, ripping over metal chairs and such – only we'll be the three-man cast made with a semi-visible bureaucratic homemade set, it certainly feels like one.

Rory Mullen, Karl Anthony and Tor Stringer might have the impression they've free acting the most chaotic performance on the Fringe (have you met they've only just arrived as.

However, as soon as each of their exquisitely observed, beautifully performed and poignantly funny tales begin, the chaos is replaced, as if by magic, by effortless talent.

The loosely connected scenes – a combination of sketches and monologues – are an even mesh-up of comedy, tragedy and horror.

They have Rob in the loneliness of a travelling Second World War soldier, to a coal miner trying to find a connection through complaining, losers, and new chicken that becomes a grotesque metaphor for a waste of life.

Beneath the outlandish comedy, there's a sadness to the writing and the way the group seem so deliberately naive themselves enough times to get anything ready.

Writer/performer Mullen is captivating, as he flips in and out of carefully constructed characters, trying and failing to stop himself laughing, building to a full belly, through an innovative use of humor, poker-fun expressions and theatre.

Powered by pure defiance, the group don't care that they've let us into the preview and the shows not even ready.

They're not doing this for the stars and a review in the Scotsman.

They're not even doing it for the money (I have to remind them to print a bucket out at the end).

They're doing this because they fun, they're free – and it's brilliant.

SALLY STOTT

Until 18 August. Today 11.55p.m.

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