

Crude absurdity: Gregory Gudgeon, Fergus McLarnon and Tea Alagic

Minimalist excursion

LIFE WITH AN IDIOT ★ Gate Theatre Rachel Halliburton

THE set aches with trendiness — a satirical homage to devotees of Wallpaper magazine — with its ultra-minimalist white floor, white walls, white cupboards, white wordless books, and square white plate displaying three perfectly positioned (but admittedly black) olives. It is the kind of place where you would dare not even sneeze, where conversation would be confined to the razor's edge of the bracingly contemporary, the kind of place where everything is so tightly under control that you almost long for a bagpiper with Tourette's syndrome to break in and destroy the calm.

This, it turns out, is a mild fantasy compared with the nightmare of bodily fluids, partner swapping, and refrigerator-abuse that ensues. Victor Erofeyev's short story — which inspired Schnittke's opera of the same name — tells of a man who has committed an unknown crime, and is informed by the powers that be that he must invite an idiot to live with him and his wife as a punishment.

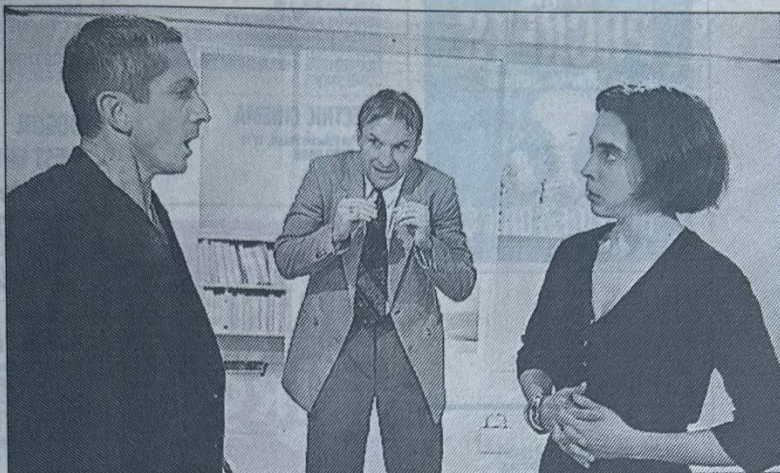
There is more than a hint of Kafka to the evening, which begins by welcoming the audience onto the white seats around the stage while a pianist plays music by Satie.

Director Ben Harrison has opted to westernise the story, even though its spirit comes so blatantly from the Eastern bloc, and his decision to relocate it to the realm of anal trendiness has paid dividends: whether it is in the spectacle of the couple discussing types of idiot as if they were selecting the latest fashion accessory, or in the heightened shock when the idiot (Vova) first pisses all over the flat.

The crude absurdity of the plot is considerably elevated by the satirically nuanced acting, especially in the pernickety finesse of Gregory Gudgeon's performance as 'I', the man being punished. But it is the visual jokes which carry the evening, in Fred Meller's stylish-as-vodka set design.

- Until 3 November. Box office: 020 7229 0706.

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