



Nikki Patel as Alia and Rob Brydon as Mr Crane

Never quite there

Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, David Cameron – these, among others, are the first voices we hear in Tamsin Oglesby's new play, a provocative comedy about what's wrong with the education system in modern Britain – “too often, our children don't get the education they need, the education they deserve”. They are broadcast through the auditorium of the recently refurbished Old Vic – now in the round – accompanied by a twenty-strong ensemble in school uniform playing the recorder or electric guitar. Three narratives are then framed by Alia (Nikki Patel), an assured, exceptional teenage refugee from Pakistan, at her interview for a place at Oxford. She's faced with an odious male don (he assumes her reference to a Beatles lyric is “some kind of weird Asian proverb”) – small fry compared to what she's been through back home (the murder of her father and uncles as well as the disappearance of her mother).

Next we meet Alia's former state school teacher Mr Crane (Rob Brydon), whose exasperation with an unruly class is furthered by a gratuitous complaint from a parent. He drafts a letter of apology on his laptop which Brydon reads aloud with a skilful blend of sardonic and touching humour: “I'm sorry if [your son] reminds you of a dickhead you can barely share a room with . . . I'm sorry if life has kicked you out of the car in your knickers . . . I'm sorry I can't fix it, I'm just a teacher”. Good teachers make a good school, Oglesby seems to say, and we watch Mr Crane wrestle fervently, day after day, with flippant students he doesn't want to give up on.

Elsewhere, a government education committee debates league tables and the difference between state, grammar, academy, independent, public, private; a class-dividing education system that appears even more arbitrary and tribalistic when explained to an outsider

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Tamsin Oglesby

FUTURE CONDITIONAL
Old Vic, until October 3

(“Public means private, right?”, Alia asks at one point – she's been drafted into a meeting as a student representative – “I like your language, how a word can mean two extremes. It's how you avoid fundamentalism”). It soon turns nasty and personal. For all his previous defence of public schools instilling discipline, the adviser Oliver (Joshua McGuire), who went to Eton, has an elaborate tantrum when his views are interrogated and pelts his colleagues with flapjacks.

Over in the playground of a local state primary school, meanwhile, a group of mothers, most of them middle-class, white, pushy, are trying to manipulate their kids into the best schools. Sarah (Peta Cornish) and her husband David (Matthew Aubrey) have recently separated; David's new flat is conveniently, the other mums point out, only a quarter of a mile away from the coveted state school. They need this advantage, though, because their son Tommy plays the piano, not an obscure instrument “like the bassoon or euphonium” that would earn him a music place. Then there is Hettie (Lucy Briggs-Owen), no less ruthless, who reels off a list of reasons (tutor, swimming, archery, debating society) why her son cannot attend his best friend Mustafa's birthday at Nando's. She is a snob, intent on her son mixing with the right sort of people at the independent school – “is it any better? It costs a fortune so why wouldn't it be”, and “ok, you're buying advantage, but I don't want my son's head flushed down a toilet”. A pariah, Kaye (Amy Dawson), is dressed in skimpy clothes and huge gold-hoop earrings, in contrast to the

tailored cropped trousers and loose-fitting cashmere of the rest. She pays little attention to her son; she doesn't care which school he gets into. He rarely turns up for school anyway.

In a sharp scene, Kaye gyrates in the centre of the playground at the 9 am drop-off: she's drunk, mascara is smeared across her face, but she claims it's to celebrate St George's day – “he bloody slayed a dragon”. Sarah bites back: “it's *slew*, not *slayed*”. This grammatical correction provokes Kaye, and the second slapstick brawl of the play erupts. The only mother to show Kaye any compassion is Suzy (Natalie Klammer), a raging adversary of fee-paying education. Looking at the photographs in the independent school's prospectus, she points out “white person, white person, white person, Saudi prince”. Still, we are left wanting something more than a succession of one-liners. It's also a shame that Kaye's disintegration – dynamically pulled off by Dawson – is caused by her new handbag-sized dog being diagnosed with a brain tumour. Oglesby misses a chance here to make one of her characters seriously affecting, rather than another socio-political caricature.

Throughout, the children, except for Alia, are unseen characters. The actors address empty spaces, and we imagine what has been said or done by the way the adults respond. This is an inspired conceit, slickly directed by Matthew Warchus, which convinces us that even though the kids are the alleged priority in all of this, they are never quite there. Towards the end of the play, after her daughter is merely offered a place at the “young offenders” state school, we see Suzy, clutching a small rucksack and straw boater, offer comfort: “it will be alright . . . No, darling, don't say white supremacists”. Suzy loses her nerve at the last moment and maintains the system. Tackling this wide-reaching, complex issue is not easy, yet *Future Conditional* manages to be comprehensive.

The writing on the wall

BEN EASTHAM

SOL LEWITT

17 Wall Drawings 1970–2015

Fundación Botín, Santander, until January 10, 2016

In his influential text “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967), Sol LeWitt states that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art”: the combination of rules generates content, the theory drives the action.

These seventeen colourful, patterned and predominantly geometric “wall drawings” at the Fundación Botín in Santander are, as the title suggests, rendered directly onto the walls of the gallery in which they are installed. Each drawing is the expression of a set of instructions issued by the artist (who died in 2007) and realized in the space by a team of trained assistants. With the conclusion of the exhibition, the walls are whitewashed and the drawings erased. The works of art persist only in the guidelines for their composition, simple written directives.

The visitor to *17 Wall Drawings* is, then, presented with two different forms of the same artwork. The first is the instruction, helpfully provided by discreet wall texts, and the second its new articulation in line and colour. “Wall Drawing 869C”, for example, is enshrined in the following direction: “From the top of a 48-inch (122 cm) square, draw a not straight horizontal line. The line is black. The second line is drawn beneath the first line, as close as possible, imitating the first line. The next line is drawn beneath the second line. Continue copying, until the bottom of the square is reached”. On the wall, the drawing recalls an image of radio waves, the ridged lines pulsing hypnotically across the square.

Like murals, these drawings adapt to the surfaces on which they are described. The most startling illustration of this is “Wall Drawing 51”, for which the only directive is that “all architectural points [on the wall are] connected by straight lines”. Installed in a stairwell, the fittings securing the handrail become nodal points in a constellation of straight lines extending to ventilation shafts, light fixtures, and the stepped corners of the wall. The pattern is determined by the architecture of the wall, meaning that while the instructions remain the same, the drawing is different each time they are carried out. This is

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