

The Flying Machine

★★★★★

Unicorn Theatre Age 7+, Shows

A spooky, old-fashioned hospital ward with hard iron bedsteads and an ominous-looking giant plug in the floor... a cruel-hearted nurse dishing out orders and medicine but no sympathy... a disembodied voice of authority blaring from a tannoy... children stumbling about with bandaged eyes... no, it's not some evil twist on 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' or 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', but a comedy for kids.

In fact, the play's dystopian set-up didn't seem to bother my eight-year-old, Ivy, who's been thoroughly hardened to the concept of adult sadism by long-term exposure to Roald Dahl. And of course, the worse the oppression, the more triumphant the revolution – and revolution is precisely what new patient Bonyek (Toyin Omari-Kinch) brings to his ward-mates Peekka (Beverley Denim) and Munib (Daniel Naddafy). His gift is imagination, as evinced not only by his ability to conjure captivating adventures out of words but by the fact that he has on his person the blueprints for a real-life flying-machine, which he proposes to build that very night.

The boo-hiss killjoy of the play is Nurse Cakebread (Maggie O'Brien), who rules with an iron fist. Her pursuit of the escaping children is the source of much thrilling suspense and her comeuppance caused my daughter to leap, cackling with glee, from her seat. To adult eyes, the denouement seemed a bit silly, but what do grown-ups know?

Phil Porter's script provides plenty of laughs, most of which go to the timid Munib, and the actors get stuck into their very physical roles with great gusto. Best of all, it's a celebration of make-believe which requires its young audience to make their own leaps of the imagination – not something they're often asked to do by other media aimed at this age group. *Lisa Mullen*