

Times Out ON STAGE

Cop this for a whodunnit

A WEB of intrigue is spinning at the Edward Alderton Theatre in Agatha Christie's *Spider's Web*, writes Steve Spencer.

The drama unfolds at the home of the Hailsham-Browns. Clarissa, second wife to Henry, entertains her guests alone, but when they leave for the golf club, a visit to the house by the husband of Henry's first wife throws things into disarray.

The arrival of the police eventually pieces events together and solves the murder mystery.

Christie's 1950s drama has all the ingredients – a few clues, plenty of red herrings – of a classic whodunnit and on the whole Wendy Marsh's production offers an enjoyable evening's entertainment.

Having said that, some directorial decisions seem a little strange: the corpse is lying on stage throughout the interval!

There were also a couple of sloppy moments with props – Pippa's secondhand book was different in Act 2 and the actual murder did not accurately correspond to the description in Christie's text.

However, while the director never allows the production to be played for laughs there are plenty of natural comedic moments which are seized on

enthusiastically by the team of actors.

Ellie Martin plays a convincing Clarissa, sufficiently beguiling and vulnerable at the same time. Her upper-class manner is perhaps the most consistent.

Her spin on the evening's events in the house draws both exasperation and disbelief from the characters. Her bevy of male friends include Delahaye (rather well played by John Hyde, thanks to a few stumbling lines), Birch (Horry Stapleton) and Warrender (Andy Kelly).

The Hailsham-Brown household includes husband Henry (Paul Friett) and the ever-hungry Pippa (quite convincingly played by Ella Banks).

Of course, the most interesting roles in this genre are those of the police. Aply played by Mark Campbell, Inspector Lord gets to the bottom of things and, as his name suggests, appears as much a toff as the suspects. By contrast, his constable (Tony Gurney) is a more-down-to-earth (if not totally accurate) Welshman.

Want to know whodunnit? Well, you will need to get down to the theatre to find out!

The next production at the Edward Alderton Theatre, in Bexleyheath, is *Oedipus the King* from March 21. To find out more, go to www.edwardalderton.org.



DOWN-TO-EARTH: Tony Gurney (PC Jones) and David Hampton (Elgin) in murder mystery *Spider's Web*.

Hero who emerges from war's shadows

RECOGNISED only recently in his native Portugal – and largely unheard of in this country – Aristides de Sousa Mendes was a hero to thousands of Jewish refugees during the Second World War, writes Mark Campbell.

As Portuguese consul in Bordeaux he issued 30,000 transit visas, against the orders of his superiors, to people fleeing the Nazi invasion of France.

Alice de Sousa's new play, *Aristides – The Outcast Hero*, in performance at the Greenwich Playhouse, seeks to build a picture of this largely forgotten man. It's a strong, lucid production with a cast of 13 keeping the action moving swiftly along to its unexpectedly poignant conclusion.

De Sousa's script dwells on the less obvious details of the Jews' appalling treatment. People wet themselves while standing in queues, while the description of how they

receive their numbered tattoos is shocking. What is perhaps missing is a sense of drama or danger.

Michael Hucks presents us with a supremely unruffled plenipotentiary whose religious conviction brooks no argument. Right and wrong are absolutes here. The only flaw in the man's character being a brief affair with a French singer.

One can't help but feel that this version is more hagiography than history, and its brevity almost works against the complex issues it tackles.

However, it is well directed by Bruce Jamieson and the cast are uniformly excellent. Particularly memorable are Robert Paul, Daniel Moor, Anna Ruben and Suzanne Goldberg, as a present-day narrator.

The next production at the Greenwich Playhouse is William Shakespeare's *Pericles*, from February 24 to March 22. Tickets: 020 8858 9256.

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Our very own Indiana Jones

AS Down House is set to win World Heritage status, the Victorian spirit of adventure and observation is also alive and well in Greenwich, writes Jules Cooper.

The Pickwick Papers, based on Charles Dickens' first novel, brought the naïve and quaint adventures of Samuel Pickwick to Greenwich Theatre with perfect timing last Wednesday. Written 23 years before the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the comical story follows the adventures of Samuel Pickwick, an observer of human behaviour. Like a Kentish Indiana Jones, the wealthy gentleman, played by Nigel Nevinson, travels between Kent, London and Ipswich and carefully recounts his stories to the Pickwick Society.

A parody of the Darwinian adventurer, our old-fashioned gent falls into trouble when he shares a carriage with the con artist, Alfred Jingle (Richard Mansfield). Eventually, the "strolling actor" betrays Mr Pickwick's companions and runs away with his friend's sister, setting off a farcical chain of events that lands the honourable Mr Pickwick in the dock of the Old Bailey. The performance is hilarious, thanks to supporting actors Richard Latham, Vanessa Morley, Paul Lincoln and Nicholas Waters.

The Pickwick Papers will be back in Kent in March. It will be staged at Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, on March 27, and Dickens World, Chatham, on March 28.

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