



All in a flap: Annie Southall, Adrian Edmondson and Issy van Randwyck strut their stuff on the French Riviera in *The Boy Friend*

# This show will make you forget life's worries

**Dominic Cavendish**  
CHIEF THEATRE CRITIC



**The Boy Friend**  
Menier Chocolate Factory  
London SE1

★★★★★  
The revival of Sandy Wilson's pastiche Twenties musical carries a particular quality of uplift this week. Staged at the Menier Chocolate Factory, just a short way from London Bridge, the show (whose delighted audiences during its five-year West End run in the Fifties included the Queen) emblematises a quality of indestructible optimism in its carefree portrait of finishing-school gals falling head over heels with delectable pals on the Côte d'Azur. But any time that skies are grey and the world too much to bear, its cloudless *joie de vivre* casts a spell

and you emerge cleansed of life's cares. Director Matthew White – presiding over the first London revival since 2007 – approaches the lighter-than-air storyline with an accent on knowing affectation. Rather as if they were trying to catch attention at a debutantes ball, the young ladies at Madame Dubonnet's villa in Nice can hardly say or do anything without striking a pose, emitting a smirking giggle or widening their eyes in exaggerated astonishment. It could all be rather enervating, but the sheer polish and panache of the cast's fluttering antics brings a smile to the lips – and Wilson introduced a soupçon of reality to offset the artifice. Having pretended to have a boyfriend, wealthy heiress Polly Browne (a part that was the making of Julie Andrews on Broadway) affects to be a humble secretary after she's instantly smitten with errant rich-kid Tony, who's slumming it as an errand boy. The show thereby offers a mild critique of the perils of pretence – Polly gets it into her head that her newfound beau may be a gold-digger;

the attainment of true love entails the dropping of deception. Of course, in terms of food for thought, that's a mere amuse-bouche. The principal pleasure of the evening (irkingly carved up with two separate intervals here) lies in watching the company take every available opportunity to give quick-stepping expression to the Roaring Twenties. The lightness and elegant wit of Wilson's lyrics, with abundant simple skipping rhymes, seems to charge the actors with a runaway glee. Bill Deamer's choreography is a delightful flapper-age confection of daffy head flicks, circular hand movements, kittenish back kicks and the kind of lithe-limbed carry-on that can make the dancers appear to be reversing and going forward at the same time. There is tap dance, there is tango and it's a shame there aren't crash courses in the Charleston on offer, because the urge to join in is faintly irresistible. It's not all beaming, dreamy young things, though Amara Okereke and Dylan Mason are ripping – tender and sweet – as the romantic leads. Janie Dee's Madame Dubonnet, attired in a *de trop* array of exotic headgear,

garish ornamentation and wafting garments, makes eyes at Polly's widowed father (Robert Portal), a long-ago beau. And former Young One Adrian Edmondson is in his element, at once reptilian and fishlike as Tony's lordly pa, an incorrigible old bouncer straining at the leash of an upright marriage to find a holiday romance of his own. "A gentleman never feels too weak/ To pat a pink arm or pinch a cheek" this randy Brit abroad used to sing in *It's Never Too Late to Fall in Love*; the lyrics have been modified here, with added business that ensures the young object of his desire is kept safely out of reach, while his imperious wife (Issy van Randwyck), face shielded by a fan, lip-synchs her cooing replies. This is the first time the sequence has been rethought in light of the MeToo era. You appreciate the considerate gesture but given the general heteronormative abandon, the best advice for untroubled viewing is to leave the progressive social awareness of the past 60 years at the door on the way in and indulge the evening's faux-period frolics.

Until March 7. Tickets: 020 7378 1713; menierchocolatefactory.com

## Arts

# A searing testament to one woman's courage and resilience

Television

**The Family Secret**  
Channel 4

★★★★★

By Michael Hogan

The *Family Secret* was the most fearless piece of programming I have seen all year. This documentary about sexual abuse and restorative justice made for grim viewing – but what emerged was a searing testament to one remarkable woman's resilience and courage. We met Kath, a thirtysomething, as she confronted a devastating childhood trauma. "I've been living with this secret for 25 years," she said at the start of the film. "It eats away at you, like you're leading a double life. Only the victim and the perpetrator know what actually happened. Now I need him to face the truth."

Through startlingly raw interviews, we met each member of Kath's family, before watching Kath and her abuser come together for a meeting which she hoped would bring some form of closure. It wasn't until 15 minutes into this hour-long film that we heard how, aged seven, Kath had been raped by Robert, her 11-year-old brother.

The abuse continued for the next three-and-a-half years, with Robert visiting Kath at night when everyone else was asleep.

Kath was accompanied in the meeting by her mother, Andrea, who clearly felt unfathomable guilt but sat stoically listening to her son and daughter. The cruel twist, we later learnt, was that Andrea had been a social worker who worked in child protection and should have spotted the signs.

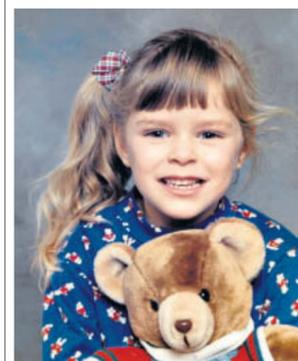
Eventually, Kath managed to fight off Robert and the abuse ended. "But just because it stops, it doesn't go away," she said.

It was only when she had a son of her own and didn't want Uncle Robert to go near him that she realised she had to tell her parents. Kath's father Chris said it was "like a bomb going off".

Fallout was still being felt. Andrea's 40-year marriage to Chris – still in denial – had since

broken down. Yet Kath kept at it, tackling her tormentor head-on. When Robert was vague about his memories, she was unerringly accurate. When he was euphemistic, she corrected him: "It wasn't intimate, it was rape. There was never a stage where I might have wanted it."

Having said what she'd come to say, she left Robert listening to a song that was important to her: *Warrior* by Demi Lovato, with its defiant lyrics: "I've got shame, I've got scars/ That I will never show/ I'm a survivor in more ways than you know/ I'm stronger than I've ever been/ And you can never hurt me again."



Childhood trauma: Kath was raped by her brother for more than three years

This unflinching film was made by production company True Vision, whose award-garlanded CV includes various Stacey Dooley documentaries, *Britain's Sex Gangs* and Monday night's *Growing Up Poor: Britain's Breadline Kids*. They specialise in films about human rights issues, and ensured this was sensitively handled.

It was directed with subtle skill by Anna Hall, whose sole stylistic flourishes were haunting music and scene-setting drone shots of the local area. There was no narration, no editorial voice at all.

As viewers we were left to listen to the testimonies in this gut-punch of a documentary and make up our own minds. I was in awe of Kath's quiet heroism and hope she finds the happiness she deserves.

# Huge, harrowed landscapes that stop short of touching the void

Exhibition

**Anselm Kiefer**  
White Cube Bermondsey,  
London SE1

★★★★★

By Cal Revely-Calder

You would assume that Anselm Kiefer knows what he's doing. He's been working since the early Seventies; his profile among contemporary artists is unimpeachably high.

He primarily paints and sculpts, and, as with the works in *Superstrings, Runes, The Norms, Gordian Knot* – a new exhibition at White Cube Bermondsey – his canvases often combine the two.

They're weighty, in every sense. The largest one here, *Ramanujan Summation - 1/12* (2019), is six-and-a-half metres square, its surface a heavy blend of emulsion, acrylic, shellac and oil. Like the others here, it's a gigantic landscape, harrowed, ashen and bleak, with wooden stumps stretching in eerie rows to something like infinity. Pressed into many of the paintings are objects: branches shaped like runes or axes or stacks of burned books – a Kiefer staple – tied to the canvas by rusting wire.

When he was young, Kiefer studied in his native Germany with Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), a performance artist who called himself "shamanic" and hoped to enchant rather than instruct his audience. While Kiefer's art, so heavy and grim, may seem worlds away from that sentiment, it actually works by enchantment too: the disasters are kept obscure.

And yet everything, as if bent by historical gravity, leads back to one catastrophe. Kiefer's first works, at the end of the Sixties, were satires of Nazi pretension. He went to former occupied territories and photographed



Bleak: *Veneziano Amplitude*, in Kiefer's show *Superstrings, Runes, The Norms, Gordian Knot*

himself, small against the land, making rigid fascist salutes. More than one subsequent painting has been titled *Für Paul Celan*, for the poet who survived a Nazi labour camp. The Holocaust was a "taboo subject" in post-war Germany, Kiefer complained – time for art to stare into the void. And so, 50 years since Kiefer began, I mistrust the title of this show. The artist claims, variously, that these new works are either about runes and myths (though what use is a symbol that few visitors can read?) or about string theory, a strand of theoretical physics that even he admits he doesn't understand. There are mathematical equations scrawled across the works, especially the 30 vitrines in the central corridor, which are gloomy and brooding, filled with sinister coils of tubes. The works have power in spite of these concepts, not because of them. Kiefer has often said that art should be "difficult", "not entertainment".

If you strip away the symbols, the works here seem of a piece with his existing oeuvre: made to be witnessed, not to be read.

In *Die Lebenden und die Toten* (*The Living and the Dead*, 2019), for instance, the seared landscape bends upwards into a ghostly amphitheatre – maybe a parliament, or a court – but it's obscured by a mass of blackened straw, obtruding flatly down the canvas, destroying the neat one-point perspective that the painting strove to have.

Forget Kiefer's new interests; they haven't really made a mark. If these paintings were as concerned with physics as he says they are, they would be energetic but confused. But they're too potent to conform to theories or tales. These, I think, are still pictures of history; pictures of guilt.

Until Jan 26. Details: 020 7930 5373; whitecube.com



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