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17

First night

A worryingly credible scandal in New York

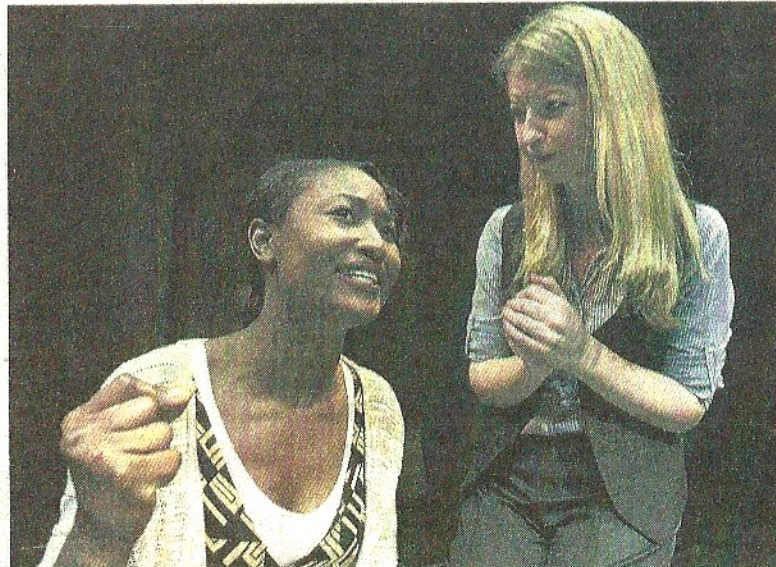
Edinburgh theatre Libby Purves

Presidential Suite
Edinburgh College of Art
★★★★☆

A black New York chambermaid reports sexual assault by a senior French politician. He says that it was consensual, and is affronted when America listens to a “black illegal-immigrant tart” and arrests him.

Sound familiar? John Binkley, the writer-director and a US lawyer’s son, was inspired by comments at Harvard from the great lawyer Alan Dershowitz, on the case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn. He expressed concerns about the tactics — overt and otherwise — with which a defence team can discredit a victim. So he wrote a fictional parallel, tweaking it to shape a tidier conclusion (in the real case, charges were dismissed because evidence beyond reasonable doubt seemed impossible: a civil suit continues).

It’s a scorching exploration of the stratagems with which rich and influential people can unbalance poor accusers. Binkley’s fictional maid (Vanessa Donovan) is educationally ambitious, intelligent, and sticks to her story despite almost caving in under pressure. Her young female lawyer (Liza Binkley), though reasonably honest with her client about what she will face, is determined to win a test case against men who harass



Vanessa Donovan as the aggrieved chambermaid and Liza Binkley, her lawyer

Inside today

The Pet Shop Boys on disco for the over-50s

saturday review

low-status women. The play, set before the case comes to court, progresses in short and worryingly credible conversations between the two lawyers and their clients. Benjamin Feitelson plays the politician (Richard

Chataigne) with patriarchal confidence: legs splayed, many admiring glances at his own crotch, sleeked hair, black brows.

While those smooth brows arch in Gallic contempt, Seamus Newham as his wily defence brief looks contrastingly bristling, grizzled and rumped, and flinches visibly when he asks Monsieur Chataigne whether he

has ever used force on women before, and gets only a reminiscent smile and “I don’t think they’d call it force.” *Zut, alors!*

So his rich wife (Sally Knyvette), takes over, despite her own long-bleeding marital wounds. “I’ll go all the way with this, but don’t expect warm and fuzzy.” She and the lawyer hire researchers to buy stories about the woman’s teenage love-life, plant smears in gossip columns and talk shows, and arrange (through offshore shell companies) untraceable bribes channelled through the victim’s indigent Haitian relatives. There is nothing, Binkley calculates, that couldn’t really happen in any such case.

One lovely scene has the defence lawyer first threatening his young woman opponent with impotent lawyerly rage, then howling to his Socialist Party client Chataigne.

“I’d call her a bleeding heart liberal, if you weren’t already to the left of her!” However, Binkley wants a “modern fairytale” and concludes this play with a *deus ex machina*. But there is nothing fairytale, or comic, about its implications.

www.edfringe.com to August 26

Benjamin Feitelson as the accused French politician

Students face fight for places

Home Staff

Teenagers who fall just short of their predicted A-level grades next week will face a battle for the last remaining places at top universities.

According to a survey by the Press Association, many Russell Group universities have said that they are full, while others have just a handful of places. Students who get higher than predicted grades, and score at least two As and a B, may find they have more choice. There is now no limit on the number of AAB students that universities can recruit.

The survey found that Oxford, Bristol, University College London, Cambridge, the London School of Economics, Birmingham and King’s College London will not enter clearing, the process that matches students who failed to get their predicted grades with available places on courses. Other Russell Group universities, including Durham, Exeter and Warwick, were not sure if they would enter, while Sheffield and Newcastle could have openings for people with very good grades.

The survey suggests that the move to triple tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 will have an effect on clearing. Last year some institutions reported a drop in places because the number of applicants hoping to start university before the hike had risen. Sheffield Hallam said that it expected to have “a few hundred” places available in clearing, similar to 2010. Last year it had 30 places.

