

# TheNational

## Gasping with laughter

Katie Boucher

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Eric Drury, George Stothard and Hussain Hadi perform in a scene from *Gasping*. Callaghan Walsh for The National

Compared to pressing play on the DVD remote, theatre can be mighty stressful. Along with the extra commitment involved in getting off of the sofa and going out to see a play, the big question – will this be any good or not – takes on extra significance. For the first 10 minutes, it's all you can do not to watch through split fingers, waiting for the crushing silence as one of them forgets their lines. Thankfully, somewhere around minute 12, things start to settle down – the hands come away from the face, one's breathing returns to normal and before you know it, you're laughing along with the rest of them. So it began with the Dubai Drama Group's production of Ben Elton's play *Gasping* at the Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre (DUCTAC) on Saturday night.

Written by the British writer and comedian Ben Elton, *Gasping* is a satirical comedy about corporate greed in which the brilliantly odious Sir Chiffley Lockhart (Eric Drury) is determined to make money where none existed before. His sycophantic, eager-to-please number two, Philip (George Stothard) comes up with the idea of selling designer air, which soon becomes a global phenomenon, before turning around and biting them, as purple-faced pensioners start keeling over on buses, and people in the developing world begin gasping.

The concept – which couldn't be more Eighties if it pulled on neon legwarmers and started dancing to Wham – has, according to the play's director Syl Rice, taken on a new significance with the economic downturn. While the assertion that young, aspiring upstarts will do anything to keep up with the Jones' has the ring of the Eighties (yuppie is written all over it) the play was given a new millennium overhaul in 2000, and the updated references are easy to spot. Where there was Aeroflot, there is Easyjet. And mentions of George Clooney and “tiny little Ericssons” have been thrown in to keep things fresh.

It can't have been easy for the four-strong cast (who, this being an amateur dramatic production, also have real jobs): Elton's machine gun-style patter means voicing reams of convoluted logic before ever getting to the point. And his trademark schoolboy sense of humour means that anyone not brought up on a diet of Blackadder might have struggled with delivery. Luckily, some of them clearly had.

Drury was suitably reptilian as the corporate ogre, his deadpan utterance of lines such as "only the British could market a Pot Noodle because only the British could stomach it" spot on. And Strothard as Philip was as close to Hugh Laurie buffoonery as you could get without actual mimicry, right down to the high-pitched giggle and innocent eye-rolling. Hussain Hadi took a little longer to warm up as Sandy, spending too much time staring out into the lights à la Shakespeare when he was meant to be talking to people. And Susan Probert as the manipulative advertising executive Kirtsen spoke all her lines in the same sneery, shoulder-wagging tone – the result being that some did not get the laughs that they deserved.

Luckily, the whole play hinges on the performance of Philip, and Strothard was more than up to the job, managing to combine self-deprecating fun with a touching (but ultimately ineffective) moral fibre. In one hilarious scene where he and The Chief are being massaged rather too vigorously in a spa, he dealt with the double whammy of having to contort his body into various extraordinary positions while making the relevant pained noises with well-judged intensity.

Such is the skill of Elton's writing here that the performances would have had to be truly terrible to take away from the play's delightfully irreverent mood. But best of all was the evidence the night provided of a thriving dramatic scene in the city. It may not have been perfect – but for all its 10 minutes of self-induced pain, it certainly beat a night in with a DVD.