

A needler in the comedy haystack



FRINGE COMEDY
By Edd McCracken

IN a dark city, down a dark street, in a dark pub, down some dark stairs (mind your head), in a dark basement lurks the brightest comedy night of the Fringe – the Velvet Laughter Masters Series. At other venues around town comedians are hurled at punters like hot oil from castle ramparts upon invading hordes, in the hope that at least one will make an impact. But here, only three comedians have graced the stage – Scott Capurro, Dwight Slade, and to round off the month, the wonderful **David Crowe**. It is not so much an all-out assault, as a devastating exercise in masterful programming, a sleek James Bond to the Pleasance's bludgeoning US Army.

From the outset Crowe declares this is going to be the smartest hour of the Fringe. To prove it he runs a gamut of topics from Shakespeare and the Bible to an acute five minute routine comparing America's need for oil to drug addiction. "What ifs" form the backbone of the show, a traditional spring-

FRINGE COMEDY

DAVID CROWE

EDINBURGH COMEDY ROOM

★★★★★

DEMETRI MARTIN: THESE ARE JOKES

GEORGE SQUARE THEATRE

★★★★★

JANEY GODLEY IS INNOCENT

SMIRNOFF UNDERBELLY

★★★

FIONA O'LOUGHLIN

ASSEMBLY ROOMS

★★

ALL SHOWS END TONIGHT

board into flights of fancy and surrealism. In the hands of many comics this is a painfully limp device, but Crowe uses it to forge a cast-iron vertebrate. This is stand up in its purest form. No bells, whistles, PowerPoint presentations or gimmicks. It is just one man against one audience, armed with a

gallery of facial expressions, the ability to mimic a great ape and some supreme material. Crowe's right: it's probably the smartest hour of the Fringe. It's also probably the funniest.

If you've ever seen a Wes Anderson film such as *The Life Aquatic* you'll understand how watching **Demetri Martin** makes you feel. Both have a love of the whimsical, underscored with a gentle melancholy beamed in from a mythical Manhattan where nerds dream. The 2003 Perrier winner specialises in oddball, but spot-on, observations about life ("I wonder how long it took to make the first clock?") that inspire as much wonder as hilarity. He creates comedy haiku – small, neatly formed ideas that set off little explosions in your head. He tilts the world off its axis and it's a giddy place to be.

Janey Godley is feeling light-headed too. Fifteen minutes before her show was supposed to start the amiable Glaswegian was in hospital after

having an allergic reaction to sushi. But she still makes it to the stage, and while she recounts outlandish episodes from her life like marrying into a gangster family, her mother's murder, and turning up stoned at her daughter's school, the plaster on her arm suggests no comic exaggeration is needed. It adds an extra layer of interest to a show that's like its host: brassy, likable and an enjoyable way to while away a pint.

Bally mums are the basis of **Fiona O'Loughlin's** tale too. Like Godley, she recounts her life story, but without the deep-fried grit of Glasgow's east end. Instead it's the sprawling dysfunction of Irish-Catholic families in Australia from which she draws her picaresque tales of nightmarish Christmases, joyless matriarchs, and being more rebellious than her conservative kids. While her performance is spirited and injected with enough self-deprecation to avoid it becoming a vanity project, her material is stretched pretty thin.