

A little over a week past I heard an interview on BBC with Gay Soper, a frequent habituÃ© of stage and screen here, on the subject of her latest show, [The Sister Wendy Musical](#). The title was all I needed to hear, I ordered a ticket right off.

For those of you unfamiliar with Sister Wendy, she was a nun who made a vow of hermitage, lived in a caravan on the grounds of a convent, and turned into possibly the most influential television art critic ever. She was treated with contempt by many in the art world for her naivete, but greeted with joy by many more laypeople who welcomed her singular enthusiasm for art and her almost evangelical fervour. I couldn't pass this up.

The show is at the Hackney Empire Studio, by Hackney Central station. This is a couple of stops past the Dunston/Kingsroad station which serves Arcola Theatre, so a bit of a haul. On a Sunday night, when the overground trains run only every half hour, this is significant. I got there with plenty of time, and had the chance to have a quick bowl of chow mein before the show. That was my first mistake.

The show was poorly attended. It had opened while I was gone, and I hadn't read any of the reviews. Now that I have I can tell why. It was not well received. I can agree with much of what has been written by the critics, although I feel that some of them (Guardian, Times) brought their critical bias against Sister Wendy to bear upon the production as well. I think that unfair. That being said, however, the show was weak.

The book and lyrics are good, as is most of Gay Soper's performance, though she must learn her lines better — a shortfall shared by many in the cast. It is the direction, staging, music and enthusiastic but amateurish supporting ensemble which drag this otherwise uplifting show down with the weight of their failings.

Staging a broad musical in an intimate setting (the theatre seats only a few dozen) is difficult. The broad strokes with which most characters in a musical are painted look cartoonish and foolish to a viewer only ten feet away. No adjustment for this was made, excepting on Soper's part, and the result was a disappointment. Were this a fund-raising performance by a church group, it would have been impressive. As an off-West End show, with tickets going for £12, it failed. The blame for this, I feel, can be laid at the feet of Okai Collier company who produced the work. Omar Okai, direction/staging/choreography deserves much of this, though with an obviously thin budget one feels Simon James Collier gets his share of blame, as well.

I do feel I must address the seeming inconsistency in my opinion of this piece, with the amateurish appearance of so much of it, and my glowing review of [The Grapes Of Wrath](#), which had a similarly amateurish cast. Well, where to begin... For one thing, Only Connect was right up front that they are a non-professional company. They are almost boastful of this, and of the nature of their work. I went into that performance not expecting anything better than a church fund-raiser. This show, in contrast, was promoted as an off-West End show, and I approached it with that level of expectation. Only Connect are a charity, and the show, besides its own good works factor, is a fund raiser. I gladly dropped a twenty in the basket on the way out, confident that it would be put to good use. Lastly, even though it was not a musical, the music in Grapes was better, better performed, and had a much greater impact in the show than anything in tonight's show.

In all fairness, I must admit to having had to leave the theatre about 20 minutes before the

end of the show (see the chow mein, above). I cannot believe, however, that any miracle prevailed in fixing the many flaws in the production that I witnessed while I was there. The final twenty minutes of a show may redeem an apparently weak script, but cannot make up for a poor performance or conception.

My final word? If you have Â£15 or less to spend on theatre in London, go see any of the other off-West End shows I have reviewed on these pages; [Thin Toes](#), [Last Living Unknown Soldier](#), [A Prayer For My Daughter](#), [The Harder They Come](#) or even [Double Portrait](#). Or, see a show in a bigger venue, like The Peacock where Sadler Wells stage its big productions, with a ticket from the half price booth in Leicester Square.

I wish Okai Collier well on their future productions, but hope they rethink their approach.

Oh, and a final note - as penance I had to wait nearly half an hour in the cold for the train. □