

ARTS

ON THE ROAD

Dominic Cavendish reviews the most interesting openings around the country

Sit and Shiver

NEW END, HAMPSTEAD

Aurélia's Oratorio

LYRIC HAMMERSMITH

Dylan Moran: Like Totally

CAMBRIDGE CORN EXCHANGE, TOURING

There's a certain brand of theatre we've come to expect from Steven Berkoff over the years. You know the kind of thing: lots of muscular, ersatz-poetic verbals and knuckle-hard, über-physical visuals. Whether or not that's your bag is, however, almost entirely beside the point when it comes to his latest play, **Sit and Shiver**, receiving its British première at the New End.

The theatrical equivalent of having a nice sit down, a cup of tea and a chat, it's too conventional to be hailed as a new departure, but, coming from Berkoff, who's fast approaching 70, its gentleness, good humour and naturalistic warmth hit you with the force of a genuine surprise. Could it be that alternative theatre's big beast is growing old gracefully?

Sitting *shiva* is the Jewish custom of commemorating the dead with a seven-day period of mourning involving friends and family, who gather together to reminisce and pay their respects. When he was a child, Berkoff thought the rite was called "sit and shiver", which wasn't completely daft, given that the bereaved are expected to deprive themselves of comfy furniture, rend their clothes and generally moan and groan quite a lot.

Here the fictional focal point for his adult exploration of the custom is a household gripped by grief for an old-style East End tailor called Monte, a man idealised by his gabby daughter Debby. Berkoff assembles only the bare bones of a plot, and, rather predictably, lets a skeleton tumble out of the closet in the form of a Gentile mistress.

Although never electrifying, it's consistently entertaining. Berkoff combines serious thoughts about the need for mourning with amusing displays of uninhibited domestic wrangling and some great flatulence gags.

Showing restraint as a director, he coaxes some lovely performances from a cast of nine. By the end of the evening, you feel you've absolutely got the measure of Sue Kelvin's Debby and Linal Haft's henpecked husband Lionel. She wears

the trousers and a perpetually dissatisfied expression on her face, while he suffers her below-the-belt digs about prostate problems with winningly forced smiles.

Over their kvetching whine, the other guests somehow make their personalities felt: notably Iddo Goldberg as Mike, their forlorn out-of-work actor son, and, above all, Barry Davis as the blind, elderly Sam, who's full of shoulder-shrugging stoicism about the years lost to trouser-cutting and inclined to launch into long, pontificating arias about everything from the 1936 march against Mosley to the origins of Brooklyn Bridge.

In marked contrast, **Aurélia's Oratorio**, returning to the Lyric Hammersmith, orchestrates a succession of sumptuous, spellbinding *coups de théâtre* even more ravishing than its star, Aurélia Thierrée, Charlie Chaplin's granddaughter. In partnership with Jamie Martinez, this bewitching creature reverses the natural order of things so that objects acquire life and people lose their autonomy: a coat appears to mug its wearer, a woman gets flown by a kite, and, in the most startling illusion, Chaplin slowly disappears, as though the egg-timer costume she's wearing is converting her into a trickle of sand.

Finally, a recommendation for word-wise Irish wag Dylan Moran, touring with a show called **Like Totally**. As fans might expect, it's a fantastically desultory affair, containing a fair amount of oldish material and delivered with a nonchalance that's almost rude. Moran gets some early World Cup digs in, baldly describing Germany as a "pointless place", but he scores highest when he's not pandering to the pack-mentality. Among witticisms so perfect you wouldn't blush to call them Wildean, I particularly loved his scoffing dismissal of the idea that being alone is character-building. "You build nothing except a little matchstick cathedral of despair," he exclaims, all wounded defiance. If Hamlet were reborn as a stand-up, this would be he.

New End tickets: 0870 033 2733; Lyric Hammersmith tickets: 0870 050 0511; Dylan Moran tour info: www.mickperrin.com