

MGM musical fantasy builds up to a once in a lifetime climax

Theatre

Once Upon a Time at the Adelphi Liverpool Playhouse ★★★★★

When William Towle became manager of the Liverpool Adelphi in 1912, he made it his intention to transform it into the finest hotel in Europe. He may have come to regret modelling the restaurant on the smoking room of the Titanic.

The sinking fortunes of the Adelphi became impressed on the nation's consciousness in the late 1990s, when the BBC's fly-on-the-wall documentary made the promise of TV in every room sound like a veiled threat.

Writer and director Phil Willmott has been an Adelphi regular, and began to muse on the hotel's fund of stories as the subject for a musical to celebrate the city's year as Capital of Culture. It's a great idea, though hard to imagine how any character or situation Willmott could invent might possibly match the titanic battle of egos played out by real-life stars such as harridan housekeeper Eileen Downey and deputy manager Brian "Just kook, will yer?" Birchill.

Thankfully, Willmott doesn't even try. Though the show opens with a scene in the reception lobby described as being "like Saturday afternoon in Primark", the action soon slips back into the hotel's glory days as a receiving house for Hollywood royalty disembarking from the luxury liners.

Willmott's challenge has been



Putting on the Adelphi ... Simon Bailey and Julie Atherton star in a tongue-in-cheek evocation of the hotel's myriad legends

to devise a book flexible enough to accommodate the Adelphi's myriad legends. Some of the episodes are certifiably real – the cowboy star Roy Rodgers really did book his horse, Trigger, into his room – and others apocryphal: it's unlikely, as is sometimes claimed, that Adolf Hitler worked in the hotel kitchen, even if he did his best to bomb it several years later.

Willmott alludes to these events in an unashamedly sentimental plot which tells the strange riches-to-rags tale of Thompson (Simon Bailey), a dazzlingly successful thief who rather implausibly trades a tuxedo for a greasy apron and a job in the kitchens to prove to Alice, the sweetly capable assistant manager (Julie Atherton), that he is worthy of her love.

Yet the story is really no more than an excuse for Willmott to indulge his MGM fantasies, which he achieves with immense verve and a tongue lodged firmly in his cheek. There's a great moment when Thompson and his old scouser chums launch into a Fred Astaire routine, Dingle-style, with dustbin lids attached to their feet.

Willmott also knows how to pen a tune; and though much of the score is little more than functional 1930s pastiche, it boasts the one big number all successful musicals require, a proud paean to Liverpoolian invincibility entitled *Once In A Lifetime*, whose swelling melody is hot-wired directly to the tear-ducts. It should be designated the official anthem of the Capital of Culture forthwith.

Alfred Hickling

Until July 19. Box office: 0151 709 4776.