

TORCH SONG TRILOGY

Pentameters

★★★☆☆

THIS award-winning play, which arrived off Broadway in 1982 – just before Aids struck – was the first time a homosexual affair had been explored sympathetically and romantically on stage. Originally, it was a trilogy of plays about episodes in the life of Arnold Beckoff, a drag queen who, despite his flamboyant and witty persona, is searching for true love and a settled domestic existence.

These reveal his encounter with Ed, a bisexual who leaves him to marry a girl; his first settled but eventually tragic existence with a young man, Alan; and finally his relationship with his mother and his adopted son.

Mrs Beckoff considers homosexuality a sickness and something not to be discussed in public. She is horrified to think her “sick” son should be in charge of a young boy. “What do you know about bringing up a child?” He replies: “Any time I have a problem I shall remember what you did and do the opposite.”

Stuart Evans gives a many layered performance in the lead role. The first scene is a monologue set in his dressing room and he delivers his first remarks in true cynical style, using the audience as his mirror. He is appearing as Virginia Hamn. “I used to be Bertha Van Nation and before that Kitty Litter”

His speech is a cry for permanent love instead of the one-night stands he experiences in the course of his career. “A thing of beauty is a joy until sunrise.” He gradually divests himself of his grotesque female make-up and wig and as he does so he emerges as a good-looking and likeable young man. The scene in which he first meets Ed is moving in its artlessness.

As for the play itself, since the 80s we have had so many plays and TV programmes about the gay lifestyle, so it is no longer viable as a social document. However, its humour and naturalism, aided by the expert direction of Simone Vause and some outstanding performances, holds our interest right to the end.

Until November 6.

ALINE WAITES

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