

Theatre

The Demolition Man

Octagon, Bolton

★★★★☆

The final years in the life of the television steeplejack Fred Dibnah form the inspiration for the writer Aelish Michael. While she fashions solid, entertaining theatre, it is piggy-backed with the prickly moral issues that often arise when reality is meshed with supposition.

Dibnah has been dead for only seven years. A rush to stage a portrayal feels a little improper, especially in his home town. He was married three times and his will was challenged in the courts. His last wife, Sheila, almost 20 years his junior, appears to be the curator of the Dibnah franchise. She is afforded a two-page write-up in the programme, for example. At what cost to the story was her compliance? Did his other wives and children have commensurate input? Or was the passage to the boards smooth? In contrast, when a production is squarely "make-believe", such matters are redundant.

The soot-dusted, straight-talking steeplejack was a much-loved public character. That he was more complex off-camera was easy to imagine — and this is the man sought by Michael and the director David Thacker. Before he meets Sheila, perfunctorily played by Michelle Collins, Dibnah is moping among his toolboxes. The offer of sex has him on his feet, chasing his new wife around the workshop like a regular Benny Hill. When cancer is diagnosed and Dibnah's plan to sink a mineshaft in his garden is thwarted, the tone falls coal black. He becomes cantankerous and self-pitying. He lashes out at Sheila, who was caring initially but is now controlling. She starts buying smoked salmon, damn it, and he resents her faux sophistication. His friends fuel his paranoia, suggesting that she is "after tha's money".

Colin Connor, as Dibnah, plays the many moods well, though discerning a great performance from a great impersonation is difficult — another conundrum of a play based on reality.

As Dibnah passes away, ascending a great ladder into the sky, one can't help wonder what the man himself would have made of a spotlight falling so fiercely on his troubled later years, when pain and worry settled upon him like hot tar. He is buried not a mile from the Octagon. Perhaps his judgment will whisper on the breeze.

Mark Hodkinson