



Mojo by Jez Butterworth

By Inceptive Productions at **Salford Arts Theatre**

Reviewed by **Paul Thompson** November 2014

Come back with me, if you will, on a return journey through time – to a happier time. A simpler time: dodgy haircuts; raucous music; urban posturing; rebellious youth.

Yes, as long ago as 1995, Jerusalem scribe **Jez Butterworth** hit the scene with ***Mojo***, an amphetamine-fuelled, cantering romp of a dark comedy about a paranoid power struggle in a locked-down Soho night club.

On the coat tails of last year's West End revival, newcomers Inceptive Productions now bring this unearthed jewel to **Salford Arts Theatre** – and a well-executed, fairground ride of energy it is too.

We're transported even further back, to fifties London, when an up-coming rock-and-roll star was a gangster's hottest meal ticket. The Atlantic Club – a dive run by small-time crooks – is the proud owner of Silver Johnny, a would-be British Elvis whose appealing scent is stimulating the senses of proper local villain Sam Ross.

Much of the play's early first act is fed through the eyes of **Potts** (***Ash Baines***) and **Sweets** (***Daniel Thorn***) as they amusingly drone on about nice shoes, set up stuff about silver jackets, and generally big themselves up with macho peacocking.

At this point, we're forgiven for buying Potts's relentless patter – believing that he's the story's main player and the club's possible leader. Sweets, we assume, is his pill-sharing deputy. The

dialogue swagger is such a convincing and dense fog of misdirection, it perhaps throws the audience member more than any receiving character.

But then arrives the all-important kick-up-the-arse to get the yarn spinning: their boss Ezra has turned up in two separate bins, and Silver Johnny has vanished. And the masks come off. As fast as his diction, Potts reveals himself as a fickle, narky, easily spooked and weak wannabe. And Sweets is just the daft bugger who looks up to him and props him up.

The battle for supremacy is on between Ezra's number two **Mickey** (*Chris Kirkby*) and the deceased owner's psychotically mercurial son

Baby

(

John Burrell

) as they bolt the doors and lie low, fearing further retribution from their rivals outside the club.

But, as you'd expect, the joy is watching them suss out and deal with their true competitors generating

inside

the club – and spotting how some are just their own worst enemy.

It didn't occur to me until fairly late on that the narrative is owned by Baby. It's a truly gripping arc – at first he appears to be nothing more than a weirdo and sadistic to bully to Mickey's ally **S**

kinny

(

Joe Exley

, brilliantly fusing Ronnie Kray with Alan Carr). But Baby drags himself through a Henry Four-to-Five transformation – wayward offspring to man of action – with the goal of rendering the erstwhile-controlling Mickey powerless to help himself to a Baby birth right.

It's pacey, fun and packed full of genuine drama. Peeling the cocksure layers off wise guys, and witnessing the vulnerability beneath – always a winner. The acting performances are stronger than a cuff round the ear from an underground king pin.

Any gripes? Not really. I can gloss over the tying a character to a jukebox rather than the text's more evocative ceiling; and stage-dressing best described as minimalist... because, hey, this is the whole point of fringe theatre. And it's quality fringe theatre. I hope the slightly-higher-than-average tenner asking price doesn't put the crowds off at the weekend because it's more than justified.

One final thought: can we have the house lights a bit dimmer next time? This may be a personal thing, but – on the front row – I felt such a part of the play, I was thinking of making a bid for leadership myself.