Zack at the Royal Exchange

Comedian, Justin Moorhouse plays Zack in Harold (Hobson's Choice) Brighouses' funny, charming and perceptive tale about the things that make life worth living and how love can flower in unexpected places.

Reviewed by Fat Roland December 2010

When cousin Virginia arrives at the Munnings' to recuperate from an illness in Harold Brighouse's play Zack, she walks into several contradictions.

The first contradiction is a family stuck in its ways of seeing, summed up by an early comment

from the family's number one son Paul that “you can't fight a prejudice. It's like fighting air.” And yet it's that prejudice that keeps the family's strongest asset, the bumbling younger son Zack, under wraps.

The contrast of the two brothers is the engine of the piece. Paul is a starchy tower of controlled anger clad in a brown tie and brown waistcoat. It’s a risk having such a dislikeable character – his zest to get what he wants stretches incredulity to breaking point – but Pearce Quigley plays him with charisma and knowing wit. Think Steve Coogan's cocky character Paul Calf transported back to 1910.

The eponymous Zack, played by Justin Moorhouse, provides the comic foil to Quigley's straight man. Shabby and aged by a tangled mass of facial hair, ‘Mr Zachary’ is lazy, unfocussed, indecisive, and as it happens, a devastating hit with the ladies and with customers of the family’s business. This is a comedy of manners, and here is a man who is “born to eat” and who never removes his spectacles because “it’s a trouble to be taking them off and putting them on.” He has little place in pre-war Britain, and doesn't his family know it.

The second contradiction is the business itself, torn between the dead wood of a joinery trade and the fading glories of a wedding catering service where people would rather buy furniture than feast. We don't get to see much of the business in the play, save for a spot of administration, Zack sharpening knives and an underwhelming model of a wedding cake. Much more real are the threats to the business, personified by a brutal debtor by the name of Wrigley who makes Paul look like sunshine and light.

Zack runs at the Royal Exchange theatre, Manchester, until 22 January 2011.