

Morten Hede – Theatre Review

A contemporary, more woke perspective on the 2004 comedy *Dumb Show* makes the somewhat old-fashioned victim–perpetrator dynamic in the play more intriguing.

The Copenhagen-based English-language *That Theatre Company* is back on stage at Krudttønden, this time with British-Australian playwright Joe Penhall’s 2004 comedy *Dumb Show*.

The play was written as a critique of tabloid journalism and questions the legitimacy of exposing celebrities’ private lives.

In the play, we meet Barry, a well-known comedian and TV host who is lured into a trap by two journalists posing as financiers offering him large sums to give a speech. The atmosphere in the hotel room where the three meet after a show is high-spirited and almost chummy. Barry, who initially refuses alcohol – with hints of a past addiction – eventually gives in.

It turns into a full-blown drinking session, and when the female journalist, while alone with Barry – wearing a tight, leopard-print dress – asks about his experiences with drugs, a small bag of white powder soon appears from his pocket. Meanwhile, she keeps shifting her handbag back and forth as he moves around the room, making sure her hidden camera captures as much as possible of his actions.

As mentioned, the play dates from 2004, and as the program notes point out, much has changed in the 20 years since.

According to director Barry McKenna, this has also led to adjustments in how the three characters are portrayed.

Still, the social developments of the past five years, particularly in Denmark, complicate the play’s message considerably.

Even though our sympathy initially lies with Barry, we see him both taking and offering drugs, and there are several moments of physical intimacy that today – without a shred of doubt – would be seen as sexual misconduct.

It’s therefore difficult to fully accept excuses such as “it’s his private life,” “he was drunk,” or “she was also flirting.”

The many recent stories about powerful people’s abusive and boundary-crossing behavior, and the debates surrounding them, have taught us the term *victim blaming*.

The awareness of the perpetrator’s responsibility therefore acts as a kind of filter between the comedy and the audience.

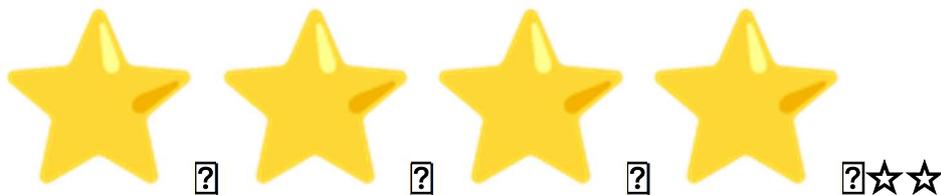
However, this doesn't become a major problem in *Dumb Show*, as the play doesn't delve deeply into the media theme but rather aims for provocation. The ambiguity in the victim–perpetrator roles (who is really exploiting whom?) only amplifies that provocation and makes the post-show discussion more engaging.

Considering the passage of time, *Dumb Show* still holds up remarkably well in 2025. But the play's greatest strength lies in its cast. Sira Stampe and Daniel Bambas deliver solid performances as the two undercover journalists. Stampe, in particular, is a firecracker of shifting tempos as she seduces, interrogates, and documents Barry.

As Barry, Ian Burns is nothing short of superb. His delivery is impeccable, and his mix of charm and poise gives this all-too-familiar male archetype just the right balance—recognizable but without losing sympathy or derailing the dramaturgy. At the same time, he reaches as deeply into the genuinely painful aspects of the role as the comedy allows, without ever sacrificing the humor. It's a performance both skilled and intelligent.

The understated British humor is striking—and for a Danish audience, almost exotic to experience. That's why it's such a gift that Danish theatre still has a corner reserved for *That Theatre Company* and a handful of other English-speaking troupes. They enrich the scene with that special nuance the British comedic tradition brings with it.

Dumb Show plays at Krudttønden in Copenhagen Ø until November 29, 2025.



Ulla Strømberg – Kulturkupeen

They are quick in their dialogue, articulate, precise and meticulously choreographed. For that is British theatre at its best. For us it may feel a little exotic, sitting in Krudttønden in Copenhagen – and not in the West End in London.

The new production *Dumb Show* is actually from 2004, written by the playwright Joe Penhall, who knows his comedy craft. Director Barry McKenna has updated it somewhat, because so much has happened in the past 21 years, where mobile phones and the internet now govern everything,

and no one can feel safe.

We acknowledge it continuously, and yet we fall into the trap again and again.

And that is exactly what the main character, played generously by Ian Burns, experiences.

He is a TV star, goes to a meeting in a luxury hotel with two younger, well-dressed people who have posed as investment advisers.

Now he's going to get rich, he thinks! But he has landed in a trap, because they are tabloid journalists out to get his entire life with failures, alcohol and drugs.

They actually get most of it, because he is an easy prey.

The stage is beautiful, the small theatre has never looked better—in this case furnished as a luxury suite in a hotel—and everything glows with pure realism with minibar, coffee machine and lovely cushions.

The production from the start is designed to be skewed, surreal, because the two young people, Sira Stampe and Daniel Bambas, dance around like monkeys and end up, to some extent, in monkey-mode.

It is actually not necessary at all to demonstrate that, because the world is so absurd, and we are all victims and all villains!

Maybe the production with the three well-acting actors would have been stronger if the whole set-up had been laid out as serious from the start, for then through the performance you would discover both the ridiculous and the deathly serious that the story also contains.

For where are we safe? And who would not like to earn a little extra, even if it means handing over one's life to the morning press.

It is good that English-language theatre exists in Copenhagen, for what other theatre would dare to play a new piece which balances on a knife's edge between comedy and "lesson"?

Recommendation. It is played in English, and maybe I missed a few sentences, but recommendation!

Kulturtid.dk – Review * * * * *

The Copenhagen-based, English-language *That Theatre Company*— which has the venue Krudttønden as its regular stage — has chosen Joe Penhall's 2004 comedy *Dumb Show* for its 50th production.

It was only 21 years ago, but so much has changed since then, especially in terms of our capability to eavesdrop on others.

Whereas today we simply hold our smartphone in our hand, you used to have to

install microphones in the space to listen in, and cameras had to be hidden away in briefcases and such.

That is exactly what happens in *Dumb Show*.

The stage is set in a five-star hotel. In the centre stands a huge double bed.

There are two red leather armchairs, a red sofa, a small red fridge — everything placed on a large beige carpet that covers the entire floor.

Long white and red curtains hang at the back. A high-tech minibar completes the scene. It's elegant and impersonal. On the sofa sits a large, modern beige handbag.

This is where we meet 3 characters: Barry – the famous TV comedian – and John and Jane, who pretend to be financial advisers.

It's Friday night, so John and Jane suggest a glass of champagne. Barry declines – he's more interested in hearing how he can become rich quickly.

John and Jane flatter Barry to a degree that borders on the insincere. They “love” his jokes.

Jane wears a pin-striped business jumpsuit. It's very professional, but she knows how to show some leg. Her assets are easy to spot. John is dressed in a proper suit.

The following Friday, another meeting takes place in the same hotel room.

The atmosphere has changed. Only Barry and Jane are present.

She wears a tight, animal-print dress that hugs her body in a very flattering way.

Barry drinks heavily this evening. He becomes more and more drunk, offers her cocaine, and makes advances toward her until she finally has to kick him away.

What Barry doesn't know is that their conversation is being recorded, so everything can later be seen and heard.

As the evening progresses, it becomes clear that the two “financial advisers” are in fact tabloid journalists of the worst kind.

Their only goal is to expose Barry and his family.

The play is marketed as a comedy, but despite a handful of decent jokes and the recurring monkey-dancing interludes, the performance is more of a tragedy.

The three characters each, in their own way, reveal the dark and unappealing sides of humanity — greed, lack of empathy, sexual misconduct, and entrapment in a world where knowledge of others' affairs, addictions, illnesses, and deaths is used for personal gain.

Ian Burns portrays the world-weary comedian with frayed morals across the full emotional range.

He moves from self-righteous moralising to wallowing in the mud of his own flaws, from which there is no escape.

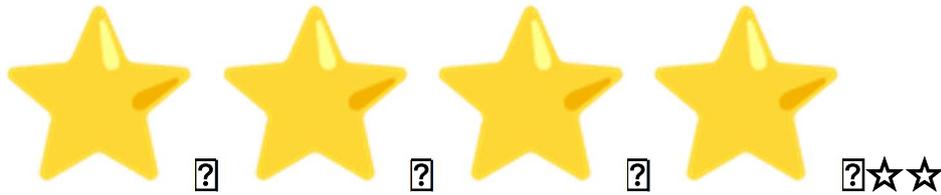
He is pitiful, charming, and violent throughout the show — an intense performance in the very best sense.

Daniel Bambas is excellent as the smooth, unscrupulous journalist.

He is neither professional nor decent, whether in his work or private life, and his ape-and-mating-dance underlines that perfectly.

Sira Stampe is fantastic as the vamp who uses her beauty to lure Barry in, only to be terrified when he gives in to temptation and tries to force himself on her.

Dumb Show is a thought-provoking and sorrowful piece about the human condition. A fitting and worthy production to celebrate *That Theatre Company's* anniversary.



Anne Liisberg – ISCENE

That Theatre Company presents *Dumb Show*, where once again they give us the pleasure of the distinctive British tone and sense of comedy. This time with an up-tempo satirical assault on the tabloid press and human greed.

The mood is high in the hotel room where Jane and John meet Barry. They want him to invest in the bank they represent and also try to hire him for an exclusive performance for the bank's VIP clients. Totally starstruck, they fawn over the ageing star comedian. But the laughter is too shrill, the contortions too exaggerated. Something feels off about this hotel meeting.

John and Jane are just as fake as their names are anonymising. They have never worked in a bank, and their agenda with Barry is entirely different from what it first appears. They have trapped him in a kind of honey-trap, where the seduction may be more about financial gain than sexual, but the goal is the same...

Here they have nonetheless miscalculated, although Barry has made himself vulnerable by saying too much in relaxed company. He is under pressure but pushes back and refuses to go public in a media confession. He insists that private is private. "You'll disappoint everyone," Greg presses. "Well then don't write about it," Barry replies, and then they're ready for another round before a plot twist sends story and sympathy in a new direction.

Playwright Joe Penhall is, among other things, known for the psychological thriller *Mindhunter* on Netflix. *Dumb Show* is an entirely different genre, but like the TV series, it dissects contemporary society with satirical edge. The drama is over 20 years old and references a specific British tabloid reality, but it easily translates to today's fake news and doom-scrolling culture, which is driven by

the same fascination.

It really is a “dumb show” we are drawn into every day.

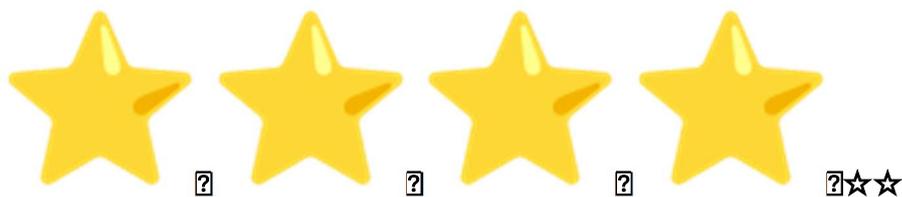
The problematic view of women implicit in Jane’s role is handled well in this production by making Liz the more ambitious of the two gossip journalists. She spares no means to reach her goal and, unlike Greg, leaves the story unscathed. She simply shakes her wig and moves on undeterred.

And why not? The world wants to be seduced and greed satisfied. The play’s primary theme circles around greed — ambition for fame, money, or both. Liz and Greg are difficult to like in any of their incarnations, while Barry is the nuanced human who alternately invokes sympathy and condemnation.

It’s refined acting, well-supported by the dynamic journalist duo in Barry McKenna’s stylishly confident direction.

That Theatre Company has delivered English-language stage art at a high level in Copenhagen since 1997.

Dumb Show is yet another strong production that offers the pleasure of the unique British tone and sense of comedy.



Review from CPH Culture – Michael Saby

Dumb Show had its premiere in 2004 at the esteemed Royal Court Theatre and returns now in a production by That Theatre Company.

The British-Australian playwright Joe Penhall crafts a pointed satire about fame, betrayal and the insatiable hunger for attention. Its relevance therefore remains—perhaps more than ever.

On stage we have Barry, a renowned comedian and TV-celebrity, introduced to “wealth managers” Jane and John who promise him rapid riches and success. Yet the façade soon cracks: what seemed like a glittering opportunity becomes a trap run by ruthless tabloid journalists.

The play is set in a luxury hotel suite: a massive double-bed, red leather armchairs, a red sofa, a small fridge, and long curtains—opulence mixing with vulnerability. The two supposed “investors” morph gradually into predators of private lives.

Though labelled a comedy, the production tilts significantly towards tragedy. Its characters display greed, manipulation and moral collapse: Barry, the fallible star; Jane and John, seductive and exploitative. The satire doesn't hold back—it mirrors our era of fake-news, sensationalism and doom-scrolling.

What emerges is a dark mirror of our cultural moment: we watch, we judge, we consume. And the piece prompts us to ask: *Who is the victim? Who is the perpetrator?* Despite being written over two decades ago, *Dumb Show* lands with disturbing clarity today.