

fringe reviews

★★★★Mainwaring ★★★★★Wilson ★★★★★Jones ★★Fraser ★Pike

The Chaucerian lucky bag

THEATRE
CHAUCER'S COCK
TALE

★★★

C (Venue 34)

THE CANTERBURY
TALES

★★★★

COWGATE CENTRAL @
 WILKIE HOUSE (Venue 26)
THE RAP CANTER-
BURY TALES

★★★★★

C Central (Venue 54)

IT'S easy to do Chaucer very badly, and I've seen some turkeys. This year, though, there are three pleasant surprises at the Fringe.

In third place, but not without distinction, is *Chaucer's Cock Tale*. This version of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is brought to life in the 1950s: Chanticleer (Harper Ray) and his wife Pertelot (Lucinda Ryan) are media darlings; Chanticleer is a celebrated singer while his wife is the perfect 1950s housewife with a passion for cooking. They live in a perfect 1950s world until a foxy young dancer sours the dream and creates a more titillating story of sex, betrayal and lies. It's a good idea but the commitment to the 1950s is only part-time and, as a result, it lacks continuity and cohesion. Better to go the whole hog, a proper 1950s extravaganza.

However, Harper Ray does cocky extremely well – so well

that by the end you can't wait for someone to come along, put him in a pot and boil him – and Helen McManamon's fabulous dancing has the audience captivated.

In second place, but only just, is Zero.6's production of *The Canterbury Tales*. This is a modern interpretation set in a pub where drinkers tell stories competitively, losing the original pilgrimage aspect. They stay away from the more obvious tales and opt instead for those of the Manciple, the Pardoner, the Summoner, the Shipman and the Friar. The production has a strong urban theme and an aggressive trance soundtrack drives home the monotony of the depravity that is a feature of all the tales.

Drink, drugs, prostitution, pornography and corruption in all its other forms make for riveting content, while the transition between the stories is smooth and the pace brisk – this is more of an interpretation than a translation but it retains Chaucer's humour and there is no need for a morality wrap at the end: the stories are so vividly and effectively presented that the audience becomes their moral arbiter. Finally, the winner: *The Rap Canterbury Tales*. Suddenly it's clear: Chaucer's language is perfect for rap, what with the alliteration and, of course, the Middle English propensity for



Zero.6 bring a competitive storytelling ethic to their pub-set *The Canterbury Tales*

rhyiming, both at the end of lines and within them, a habit inherited from the oral tradition of story-telling and used as a memory aid.

Baba Brinkman sets his version in 21st-century urban US, as a group of rappers battle it out for the best rap while touring: the Miller (sponsored by Miller beer), the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath and Chaucer himself all get up to have a go. And it's truly awe-inspiring: especially as

Brinkman's production, contrary to what one might expect, stays closest to the original in terms of style, context and language.

The show is also a reminder that there's no need for a set or for elaborate costumes for a production to work: merely a sharp script and one charismatic and versatile actor. It is also Brinkman who best recreates the ingenuity and humour of Chaucer.

This is not to judge these

shows purely on their fidelity to the original; far from it. But even when each stands in its own right as a piece of theatre, Brinkman's is the most consistently entertaining. It could hold its own in both the rapping world and the theatre world. Go see.

Zoë Green

The Canterbury Tales until 22 August, today 12:10pm; *Chaucer's Cock Tale*, until 30 August, today 2pm; *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, until 30 August, today 2:30pm