

This barking mad romp is the most bonkers show of the year

Reviewed by **JOYCE MORGAN**

★★★½

We're going to hell in a handbasket. What with war, famine, plague and crazy house prices. The horrors overwhelm us, just as they did the ancient Greeks. Well, maybe not the house prices.

You gotta love this title. It captures the spirit of the most fabulously bonkers show I've seen this year. This is a zippy 80 minutes of anarchy, replete with dancing frogs, knock-knock jokes, Greek gods and, yes, the odd show tune.

Based on Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, this adaptation by Alex Kendall Robson, who also directs, retains the absurd spirit of the original. First performed in 405 BC, it's one of the world's oldest comedies.

Then, as now, the play laments the state of the world in general, and of theatre in particular.

The comedy leaps into flamboyant life with the appearance of Dionysus (Pat Mandziy), in an animal print wrap and gold headband, and sidekick slave Xanthias (Eddy O'Leary) in the skimpiest of togas.

Dionysus, god of theatre, wine, ecstasy and madness has boldly decided that the world needs saving – and the way to do it is by putting on a good play. If only there was a playwright up to the job.

He has a cunning plan. He'll head to Hades with his sidekick, reclaim the late, great tragedian Euripides, bring him back and put on a play so good it will be the world's salvation. The god of theatre has a grand view of what theatre can achieve.

Much of the comedy comes from Dionysus's encounters en route. The road to hell is paved with oddballs, from the brawn-but-no-brains Heracles (Axel Berecny), who wields a club like a phallus, to the singing ferryman Charon (James Robin). Charon's *Punting on the Styx* – a reworking of *Puttin' on the Ritz* – was a musical highlight.

Although the play has its roots in ancient Greek, its comedy feels very British, with echoes of innuendo-laden *Carry On* films, Monty Python absurdity and, in Dionysus's appalling treatment of his sidekick, *Fawlty Towers*' Basil Fawlty and Manuel.

There are in-jokes about the price of foyer wine and audience members whose phones go off during plays. Hades has a special place for them.

Despite the title, the Frogs make only a short albeit memorable appearance in a burlesque-style number.

Mandziy was a bold, arch Dionysus and together with O'Leary as Xanthias, the pair were an entertaining high-camp double act. With his strong physicality and comic timing, Berecny as Heracles delivered the night's most compelling performance.

Josh Carter's economical costumes evoked the Frogs with little more than simple green gloves and headbands. Tom Bannerman's set created an industrial looking underworld.

Some of the gags didn't land as well as they could, while a couple of the musical numbers would benefit from greater projection. Most problematic was the new ending that shifted the tone and felt tacked on.

But this is an imaginative reworking of a classic. It's as barking as hellhound Cerberus – but a lot more fun.