

Rum tale of the life of Scots navy genius

New company turns in strong performance

MUSICAL

John Paul Jones
Church Hill Theatre ★★★★★

A BRAND-NEW musical received its world premier in Edinburgh last night, which is not too unusual an occurrence, given the wealth of professional talent which treads the boards of the Festival, Playhouse and Lyceum theatres.

This musical, however, was at the Church Hill Theatre in Morningside. And it was a completely amateur production. Not just the actors, dancers and musicians either. Strikingly, this was 30-year-old writer Julian Wagstaff's first-ever production.

And it passed the first litmus test of a good musical and production – the audience went home humming the tunes.

Not that Wagstaff will be troubling Lloyd Webber just yet. But he's taken a difficult piece of raw material and turned it into solid piece of entertainment. And the brand new Freedom Company, formed specifically to stage the piece, has given a more than adequate interpretation of it.

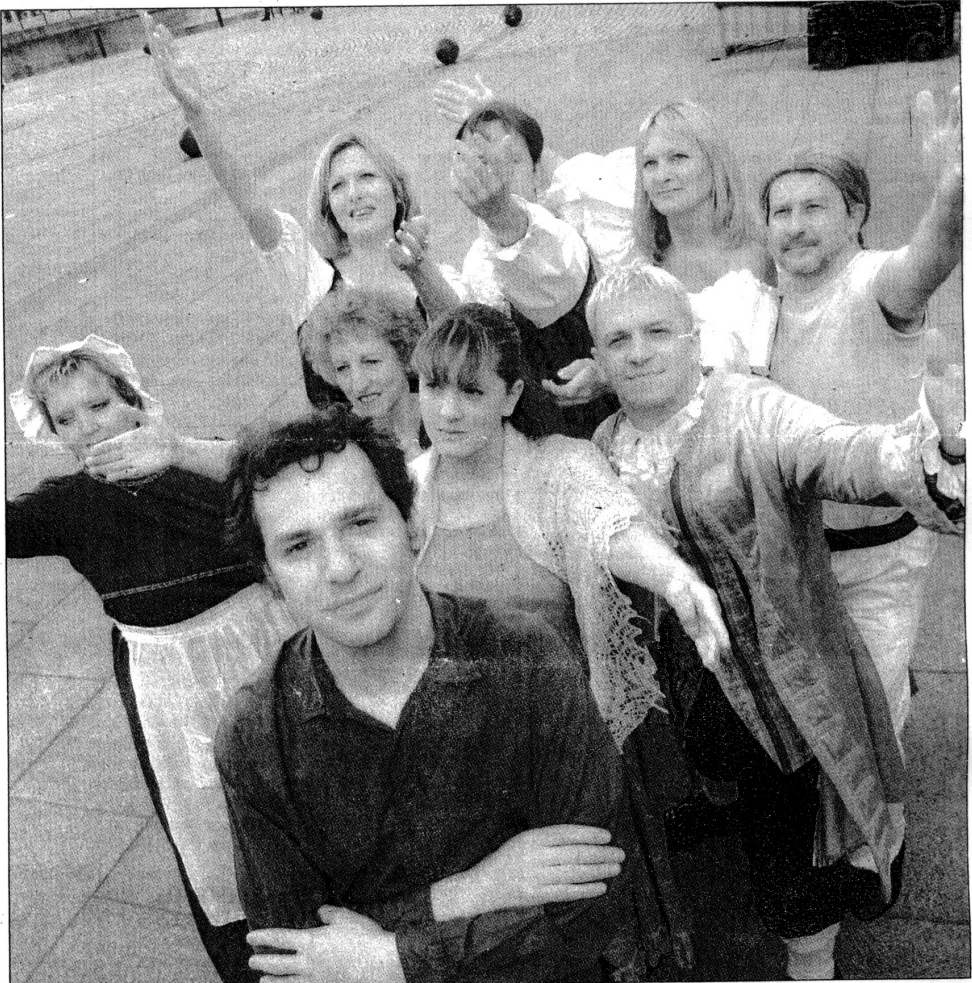
Raiding

John Paul Jones is one of those historical Scots whose name you recognise, but can't quite remember what he did. In fact, he was a Dumfries lad, born simply John Paul in 1747. He was the son of a gardener and he was remembered as being the founding father of the American Navy.

While British soldiers were fighting the American War of Independence on American soil, Jones brought the war to Europe, raiding the Solway Firth and, most famously, defeating a British Frigate at Flamborough Head.

Wagstaff has used the device of an argument in a Dumfriesshire tavern to tell the story. There, in 1792, Robert Burns and a one-time sailor, Jack McClue, are arguing over the merits and otherwise of John Paul Jones.

The catalyst for their argument is Jones' sister, Janet Taylor, who brings news that Jones might well be returning home. To Burns, Jones is a romantic hero, who



SEA FARERS: Writer Julian Wagstaff, front, with John Paul Jones cast members, clockwise, Ireane Beaver, Lynda Lawson, Kate Palmer, Gordon Murray, Sarah Gilchrist, Chris Allan, Andy Millan and Maira Beaver

fought for the cause of the common people. But to McClue, he is a scoundrel and cheat, who based his rise to fame on acts of piracy.

All the way through the production, Burns and McClue proved a commentary on Jones' activities, including his raids on English and Scottish soil, meeting of Benjamin Franklin in Paris, success in battle, return to Paris as a hero, and refusal to give up the sea for an easy life on land.

Ian McInnes gives the best account of himself as Robert Burns. He has a sweet, rounded voice, which is perfectly attuned

to Burns' romantic notions of his hero – in contrast to Gordon Murray's strident and opinionated Jack McClue. James Dickson is in slightly more rasping voice for the title role, but he carries a tune well. And his beautiful love duet with Jane C Young, as the French Countess Nicolson, who Jones loves and leaves in Paris, is the turning point of the production.

Despite strong arrangements from the orchestra under Simon Hanson, though, this teeters along for the much of the first half. You can understand Wagstaff's formula, but there's too much talk, and the

songs don't drive the story forward. Only in the exciting battle scene at the end of the Act One does the musical's potential become realised. Act Two, however, flows much better as Wagstaff gets to the nub of his tale, which is to question whether Jones, champion of the common people, can be reconciled with the Jones who fell in love with the French Court.

But although flawed, this is an enjoyable production well worth seeing.

● *Run ends Saturday.*

Thom Dibdin