

This tale of Olympic catastrophe truly deserves a medal

By Alan Chadwick

NIC SAMPSON: MARATHON 1904

Race along to watch

★★★★☆

THERE are more stand-up comedy shows at the Fringe this year than there are overflowing litter bins. Which is saying something. And they can all start to merge after a bit.

But there's little chance of that happening with New Zealand comic Nic Sampson's memorable debut hour. More likely you'll head straight to Google to check out whether the incredible story he presents on stage is as true as he says it is. (I did. It is.)

The show focuses on the 1904 Olympic Games, held in St Louis, Missouri (the first outside Europe and an omnishambles of the first degree). The spotlight in particular is on the marathon, described as 'the worst race in Olympic history'.

Sampson stumbled across the tale after carrying out research ahead of entering a marathon.

His endeavour turns out to be our gain, as he brings the race –

and the characters who were party to it – to life here in the sort of history lesson you wish you could have had at school.

It's a gem of a show, full of comic dissemination as he sets the scene – the event was spread over five months; a man with a wooden leg won six medals in the gymnastics – and introduces us to the gallery of characters.

These include President Teddy Roosevelt's wild-child daughter

ATSUKO OKATSUKA: THE INTRUDER

ONE of the many Fringe debuts is LA-based Atsuko Okatsuka, who's been named one of *Variety's* 10 Comics to Watch and is filming her show for HBO. Not so well known here, she doesn't disappoint, with a set constructed around finding an intruder in her home. Her style is punchy and quick-fire as her story veers off into territory about her heritage (she was born in Taiwan and spent her childhood in Japan) and topics including why she thought only white people got food complaints. She has 'big things ahead' written all over her.

■ *Pleasance Courtyard, until Sun*

Alice and her pet snake, Emily Spinach; stiff upper lip British runner Tom Hicks; a Cuban postman so laid back that at one point he took a roadside nap; and Olympic officials who decided runners were not to be given water as dehydration would make them run faster.

I'm loathe to give away too many spoilers. Suffice to say that the race was beset by catastrophic conditions, packs of wild

dogs, car crashes, the wrong runner being crowned winner and a side-splitting example of early doping involving brandy, egg and rat poison.

Sampson has an easy-going warmth and inventive comic touch that can't but help charm. And while the 1904 marathon may have been a disaster, his show is a triumph.

■ *Pleasance Courtyard, until Sun*



One to watch: Atsuko Okatsuka

TINA BROWN: STORIES THAT SELL PALACE PAPERS

LADY Evans, aka Tina Brown, ex-editor of *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, held sway over Hollywood and the Big Apple in the 80s and 90s. She arrives at the Book Festival to discuss her second book about the Royals, *The Palace Papers*. Don't expect her to pull any punches discussing those she feels have let the monarchy down, in what is sure to be a lively event full of insider insights into the great and good.

■ *Edinburgh College of Art, today*

TOM WALKER: JAVELIN

TOM Walker is an acquired taste, but there's something about his free-wheeling, manic energy and the sort of organised chaos that he brings to this mix of mime and scattergun stand-up centred around his love for the javelin that is hard to resist.

His bull in a china shop mime skit, with the bull gently wandering round looking at the fine china, is the sort of surreal territory he can slip into. The way he powered through a laptop failure that sabotaged his ending by riffing on the tech collapse and doing the ending anyway was hilarious.

■ *Assembly George Square Gardens, until Sun*

JUNGLE BOOK REIMAGINED

CHOREOGRAPHER Akram Khan offers up his take on the Rudyard Kipling classic with a dance piece that is one of Edinburgh International Festival's biggest highlights. Mowgli's journey is reinvented through the eyes of a climate refugee of the future who finds himself alone in a deserted big city inhabited by wild animals. Featuring ten dancers, an original score and state-of-the-art animation, it is worth checking out.

■ *Festival Theatre, Thur until Sun*

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