

Cabaret
Players' Theatre
Club
 Wilton's Music
 Hall, E1
 ★★★★★

Where better to see a gala night of Victorian music hall than in the venue that is one of London's treasures?

The Players' Theatre Club has quite a pedigree of its own. Co-founded 75 years ago by Leonard Sachs, who went on to become master of ceremonies of that long-running BBC institution *The Good Old Days*, the group continues to champion the virtues of Victoriana. The old Queen stared down from a scarlet banner erected across the stage as the chairman Johnny Dennis dispensed genial Pickwickian humour and introduced the players, young and old.

A cynic might object that

there's a heritage-industry flavour to the venture, but anyone who enjoys a modern-day alt-cabaret extravaganza such as *La Cirque* should be glad of the chance to see how an earlier generation laid down the conventions. Jan Hunt's brisk production, complete with traditional audience singalongs, mixed sentimental ballads with earthy humour. Her own routine as the eternal bridesmaid, wizened but ever optimistic, proved that risqué jokes did not start with Julian Clary.

David Carter supplied tireless accompaniment at the piano as Julia Sutton, Jane Webster, Richard Winch and Judith Hibbert performed period songs that ranged as far afield as the era of Gracie Fields. George Formby's

persona may be an acquired taste, but Andy Eastwood plunged in fearlessly. Ben Stock supplied his own knockabout musical routines, and 14-year-old Ellie Bamber pulled at heartstrings on *Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow* while subjecting a stuffed moggie to some undignified treatment.

The statuesque female magician known only as Romany survived a misfiring rope trick at the climax of her act, while Michael Pearse stole the show with his brisk, Frank Carson-style gags, all delivered amid impressive balancing tricks. *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing* have the megawattage, no doubt; but the older generation has the guile.

Clive Davis