

Sign of the Times (Tour)

Tim Firth's comedy is revived at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds ahead of visits to Kingston and Ipswich

By [Anne Morley-Priestman](#) • 28 Jan 2015 • Bury St Edmunds

WOS Rating: ★★★★★



Sign of the Times is not a new [Tim Firth](#) play; it was initially called *Absolutely Frank* and I saw it for the first time in 2008 at the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch. Over the years it's changed quite subtly, though the plot core remains constant.

This is deceptively simple. A middle-aged man with years of experience in his job encounters a reluctant work-experience teenager; they meet again under apparently very changed circumstances five years later.

If Frank ([Robert Gill](#)) seems at first to be a curmudgeonly little Caesar, over-secure in his long-term job of erecting illuminated signs in Batley, he soon reveals another side to his character. Frank yearns to write a best-seller with big-screen potential, something in the style of John Le Carré or Frederick Forsyth.

Alan ([Thomas Pickles](#)) may have left school with minimal qualifications and be doing as little as he can to ensure that his unemployment benefit continues. But he can draw very well and is a leading member of a band which has cut its first disc.

We soon realise that this chalk-and-cheese duo actually have much more in common than they're prepared to admit. [Karen Simpson](#)'s production balances the different levels of humour - situation as well as character based - so that our sympathies sway with each new revelation, just as those of Frank and Alan themselves change.

There's a good set design by [Lucy Sierra](#) and a cleverly unobtrusive soundscape by Jon Nicholls. But it's the actors who have to carry us into their world, with its everyday blend of the mundane and the new-surreal. This, the pair - Gill in both acts and Pickles particularly in the shorter second - manage superbly.

Sign of the Times continues at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds until 31 January. It then plays the Rose Theatre, Kingston (3-7 February) and New Wolsey, Ipswich (24-28 February).