

King Cotton

Lowry, Salford

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Rejoice: this could be the Les Mis of the north. The music is by the Ashton-under-Lyne Brass Band, because the show is about Lancashire. During the American civil war, President Lincoln blockaded the southern ports so that Lancashire cotton mills were deprived of the cotton that was grown and harvested by slaves. Ergo, if you were against the blockade, you supported slavery: we need cheap cotton, and cheap cotton needs slaves. The point of having a brass band is that it's equally at home with Southern blues and the old tunes of northwest England, reminding you that the lives of black slaves and white cotton workers had things in common. This is a popular but serious musical. Jimmy McGovern's book has toughness, urgency, a touch of serious melodrama and rough humour. It features a potbellied Scouser as a grumpy God, being nagged by a suave archangel to do something godlike. Jude Kelly's direction has huge power, deep feeling and great clarity. The show is in Liverpool this week, and it's worth a long journey.