



Scottish Arts Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION

It should be noted the views expressed in this evaluation are intended to represent, as far as possible, an objective aesthetic judgement. Specialist advisors and officers should avoid making judgements based on their own personal tastes and preferences.

Artist/Company: Pitlochry Ensemble Company

Venue: Pitlochry Festival Theatre

Title of Event: Snake in the Grass

Type of Event: (e.g. performance, exhibition, informal showing, work-in-progress, workshop, screening, lecture etc) Drama

Date of Visit: 17/08/07

Overall Rating: Good

(Please rate the event overall, taking into account your ratings for each section. Please state the key reasons for your overall ratings – i.e. the particular strengths and weaknesses. If the management of the event affects the overall enjoyment of the event, please comment, but the overall rating should be based on the artistic merit of the event.)

This was clearly an astute piece of programming. The sell-out audience on the Friday night I attended Pitlochry were palpably pleased to be in attendance. Adults were confident enough in the material – or Alan Ayckbourn – to bring their children. They seemed not to be disappointed. They greeted the set – an impressive overgrown garden complete with tennis court and summer house – with applause. They were rewarded with three well delineated characters and a comic thriller with darker undertones and a handful of eleventh hour twists and turns. It was all – if predictably – directed (but then Ayckbourn doesn't give you much room to manoeuvre) ably performed and technically faultless.

NB. This report should, ideally, be read alongside the report for THE PHILADELPHIA STORY watched at the same theatre.

Name: _____ Jack Bradley _____ Date: 30 / 8 / 07 _____

Specialist Advisor X Scottish Arts Council Officer *Please circle the relevant title*

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named above. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or an officer of the Scottish Arts Council, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work and to the management of the venue, if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report will form evidence for the Artistic Leadership and Public Engagement sections of the Quality Framework and be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to

applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Joint Board to report on the overall performance of its funded organisations.

Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section. Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:

- 1 - Very Poor** – standard falls well below what is acceptable.
- 2 - Poor** – not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation.
- 3 - Competent** – routine rather than especially interesting.
- 4 - Good** – well conceived and executed
- 5 - Excellent** – conceived and executed to a high standard.

1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the artistic quality of the event, with particular reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the following:

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Vision and imagination of work - Quality of ideas, skills in execution; if you've seen the work of this artist(s)/ company before, please comment on the comparison.</p>	Good - 4	<p>This was my first visit to Pitlochry and I was pleased to see it employs an ensemble company, a structure that is satisfying for actors and audience alike. The assembly of a repertory season is a particular challenge as one looks to achieve a balanced selection of plays that offer both variety and popular appeal. It also has to be constructed so there is fairly democratic distribution of parts whilst playing to the strengths of one's more experienced company members as well as giving room for the development of the younger and newer performers. Without watching the entire season, it is difficult to rate the success of this, but on the evidence of this show, the audience were able to enjoy a skilfully directed all-female play designed to entertain.</p>
All (if relevant)	<p>Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection Please indicate how the event originated eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, artist-led or commissioned.</p> <p>If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme.</p>	Good - 4	<p>This is one of six plays in a season. The others include two period plays (The Flowers of Edinburgh and The Magistrate) a history play from the 20th Century, Taking Sides; an American comedy, The Philadelphia Story; the more recent stage road-movie Passing Places and this offering, Snake in the Grass, a dark comic thriller that touches on themes of abuse and recrimination. Together they are sold to us as a season entitled Past Imperfect, a reflection on how forgotten events impinge upon the present. Since no play is without backstory, the unifying theme is somewhat self-evident. It is easier to categorise them as, apart from The Magistrate, all from the 20th Century and, notwithstanding The Flowers of Edinburgh, all from the English-speaking world. Four are – or are dependent upon – comedy.</p>
All	<p>Success of event against stated aims - in the programme or other printed material, including how well it communicated the artistic themes.</p> <p>Education events – see ¹below for guidance</p>	Competent - 3	<p>In terms of the play being part of a wider season concerned with the impact of the past, the choice of plays fits neatly into the stated aims. Whether the play really explores these themes or artistic intentions is another matter. Ayckbourn plays with a light touch so the more serious themes do not resonate for long. Plotting and laughter quell the tears so when the director, John Durwin, says Alan Ayckbourn makes us laugh, cry and be scared, I fear he rather overstates the author's achievement. Ayckbourn dabbles with ghostly presences. His comic signature is such it can never be much more than theatrical hokum: if he makes the audience jump on the Act I curtain line and leave us with the feeling of the possibility of "the afterlife" at the end of the evening that is testament to Durwin's deft direction and change of tone.</p>

¹ Education is a bridge between artform excellence and increased access and participation, and it is people centred. Providing opportunities for learning and progressing in an artform or using an artform to address other, non-artistic, outcomes are equally valid; in either case a high quality strategic approach is required in order to benefit the participants and the organisation. Delivery can be through workshops, post/pre-show discussions, outreach work, etc aimed at any age group.

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Performers/tutors - technical standard, performance skills and ability to communicate and engage.</p> <p>Where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.</p>	Good - 4	<p>Though a 3-hander, the play's success turns on the portrayal of the two sisters. As the blackmailing maid, Iorna McDevitt is strong and confident with more than adequate presence. Her part of Annabella, given by Carol Ann Crawford, teeters on archetypal. She is played as slightly too "big" as the imperious returning sister and provokes little sympathy. Given the comedy and the moral compass of the play, imperiousness is the right choice but it needed taking down a tad. The most challenging role, Miriam, is also the most rewarding because Jacqueline Dutoit must convey the dysfunctional spinster and conceal her larger purpose. It is a credit to the performance that when we learn she is actually the guiding hand in the proceedings, we are both surprised but do not find it implausible.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	n/a	Not really applicable, though the piece is convincingly "blocked".
Theatre	<p>Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.</p>	Competent - 3	<p>This is not vintage Ayckbourn, deriving from his middle period and interesting because it pre-figures his later concern with female psychology. One cannot fault the structure of the play as it moves from return of the prodigal daughter, to inheritance, the blackmail plot and the subsequent second act reversals. Where the play begins to creak is when the two sisters return from their burglary, learn that Alice may still be alive and then they proceed to tell "ghost" stories. This is merely a clunky device to reveal their father's cruelty and abuse, followed by revelations of a bad marriage and descent into alcoholism. The depth of the analysis is exposed when Miriam is asked whether she enjoyed her punishment. She pauses before saying "I think so, yes, maybe". Suddenly, the play feels perfunctory, this exploration unearned, and it moves quickly back to the safer territory of plot-twisting.</p>
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	Good -4	<p>This is well-staged. As I say elsewhere, Ayckbourn gives you little room for manoeuvre, so much credit goes to the casting and confident shifting between comedy and thriller. It is only the clumsy revelations (see above) that strike a false note. Wisely, Durwin tries to make light of these so they do not drag the play into too morbid a territory.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/ recorded) to the production.	n/a	Not really relevant. Apart from a pre-show recording of Susan Vega, there is practically no soundscape.
Dance, Theatre	Design – costume, set, lighting. Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.	Good - 4	<p>This ultra-realistic depiction of an elapidated and neglected country garden rightly drew applause. Moreover, the angling of the fixed structures – summer house and tennis court, stairs to house – made for good use of the space and varied exits and entrances.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	<p>Quality of Presentation/Engagement</p> <p>Performing Arts - technical presentation of the production (eg lighting and sound cues, etc).</p> <p>Crafts/Visual Arts - Use of equipment, space and overall layout/hang</p> <p>Education events - relevance/ appropriateness of presentation and teaching methodology (one to one, group, child centred); details of participant group and activity, including genre.</p>	Good - 4	Not a complex show with few states required, but it was well lit and shifts in time were atmospherically achieved. A first rate technical performance.
All	<p>Audience</p> <p>Performing Arts - appropriateness of the production for the audience/participants; estimate the size and reaction</p> <p>Crafts/Visual Arts – time spent, interest, activity, and visitors' books comments, number of visitors/ participants at the time of visit</p> <p>Education/learning – pre-event involvement, participants/ schoolteachers reaction, understanding, commitment, enthusiasm, number involved, etc</p>		This was a sell-out show with an appreciative audience The mixture of gasps and laughter at the close of Act I showed the high level of engagement. The quality of the production means I suspect not everyone would share my reservations about the play itself. Once again a tribute to deft directing.
All	<p>Additional Interpretative activity – what activities were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist's talks, discussion groups? Please indicate age-groups targeted.</p>	Competent - 3	Post-show discussions are listed – 1 for each of the season's shows
All	<p>Outcomes of education activity – what learning/skills development took place? What did participants take away with them? Are education resources being provided for follow up work? Is it strategically linked to the curriculum (formal or informal)?</p>	Competent - 3	There are summer schools for 5-18 but nothing specifically designated for this show.

2. Management of Event

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and the venue, with reference to the checklist below, including additional comments/observations. Please try to view the venue and the services, and interpretative material as though you had never visited it before eg if you did not know the venue's location, how easy would it be to find your way there, and to find your way around once you had arrived?

Criteria	Comment
Suitability of the venue for the event	The play sits up well on this stage and forms a popular addition to the season. Clearly Ayckbourn goes down well here.
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	There are season programmes available as well as individual programmes with background on the plays and playwrights included. There is also a TV display in the foyer, précisising this information.
Publicity/ pre-publicity – leaflets, posters, websites, etc. What is produced, is it easy to understand and where can you get the information? Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event and comment on the company/organisation's website.	A good web-site and season brochure.
Ease of booking and payment	Going on line several months ago, I found the tickets were not available, even though the season was announced. Eventually, I phoned to book the tickets.
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	It's hard to miss a big building in a tiny village next to a Loch.
External signage and signposting	Was discreet but again its unique location made it easy to find.
Internal directional signage	This was very clear.
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	This seemed v. good. 4 wheelchair spots at least. Disabled parking, loops, amplifiers and audio description.
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	A 7.30 start seemed fine. Shame all the restaurants in Pitlochry shut early...
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	Excellent, very helpful. Food and drink was expensive in the heater (and the village)
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding ²	Yes, as required.

² In press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, company's website, notices display, exhibition materials, websites and advertising, recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, computer programmes etc.) Where the event is publicised in the programme brochure of another organisation (eg venue, gallery, etc) then SAC acknowledgement should appear against the particular programme entry for this event.

3. Organisation's Comments (optional)

This is the organisation's opportunity to respond to points raised within this assessment. Please do not feel obliged to fill this section in. In the spirit of the Quality Framework, we would ask that any comments are self-evaluating, providing an insight as to why, if there is, a major disagreement of response between the organisation and the evaluation, in a constructive way.

This will not alter the rating given by the assessment, but will allow the organisation the opportunity to give their opinion/feedback. The Scottish Arts Council reserves the right to edit comments if they are deemed to be libellous or defamatory.

As the Scottish Arts Council implements the Quality Framework internally, we intend to publish artistic evaluations on organisations that we support regularly on our website. The final artistic evaluation, including the organisation's response will be published on a quarterly basis on our website.

Please keep your response to max 500 words. If we do not hear from you in 15 days, we will assume that you do not want to respond.