



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 Festival Theatre
Venue:	Pitlochry Festival Theatre
Title of Event:	Snake in The Grass by Alan Ayckbourn
Type of Event: (e.g. performance, exhibition, informal showing, work-in-progress, workshop, screening, lecture etc)	Performance
Date of Visit:	29 September 2007
Overall Rating:	Good
<i>(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.)</i>	
This was a well produced piece of theatre that despite having flaws in its concept as a play (not really knowing if it was comedy or horror/thriller) was well executed and engaged its intended audience.	
Name: Lorna Duguid	Date: 22 October 2007
Specialist Advisor X Scottish Arts Council Officer	<i>Please circle the relevant title</i>

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	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.	competent	This was not a challenging piece of work and was not intended to be so. It suited its audience very well, and was very well produced. However I felt it did not show much in the way of imagination, being a pretty straightforward interpretation of a competent script. This does not mean that the piece was poor but rather it would have been difficult to bring any new ideas to it. I did feel that leaving the piece set in the home counties was unnecessary and given that the actors seemed to struggle with the accents (and that this dated the piece somewhat) that it would have been no loss to have the actors speaking in their own voices, which would have brought a degree of freshness to the script. Indeed all three actors had completely different accents and given that 2 of them were meant to be sisters this jarred.
All (if relevant)	Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection Please indicate how the event originated eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, artist-led or commissioned. If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme.	Good	The play seemed to fit well into the Pitlochry season and suited its audience, many of whom I heard discussing it in the bar afterwards as one of the highlights of the season.
All	Success of event against stated aims - in the programme or other printed material, including how well it communicated the artistic themes. Education events – see ¹ below for guidance	good	Pitlochry has a long history of programming work for its established audience. The stated aim in the programme for this season was “to present a season of plays that demonstrate the inescapable influence of the past over the present” This play suited this theme well and was presented well
All	Performers/tutors - technical standard, performance skills and ability to communicate and engage. Where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.	good	The three female actors are all experienced and successful performers. As previously mentioned I found the accents very jarring and they showed no coherence – indeed Carol Ann Crawford playing a sister returning from Australia had a more middle class English accent than the sister left behind for twenty five years. However this aside they all created strong and memorable characters and handled the comedy timing of the piece very well.
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	n/a	

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
Theatre	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.	competent	I found the script to be a little trite, and seemed to be unsure of what it was meant to be. The stated aim of the play was to make the audience laugh, cry and be afraid but it seemed unable to handle any element well. It did have moments of high comedy and a couple of spooky scenes which made the audience jump, but as a psychological thriller I found it failed completely. The moving of mood from one state to the other seemed to be impossible to carry off and I did pity the actors and director in trying to find a way to make the transition from intimate revelatory moments to comedy and back again.
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	good	The direction was pretty straightforward as the piece did not lend itself to any new interpretation. However the pace was good and the casting made complete sense. As previously mentioned I did find the directorial decision to leave the piece set in the home counties jarring and the play would not have suffered from being moved further North. (Director: John Durnin).
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/recorded) to the production.	good	Recorded music that added a suitable eerie tone to the play.
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.	excellent	The set was very striking being set in a very realistic garden. Lighting and other effects were uniformly good. (Set Designer: Adrian Rees).
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>	excellent	This was a very slick and well presented show in all its technical aspects.
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>		The production was entirely appropriate for its audience. The audience seemed very elderly with a large number appearing to be in groups. The auditorium was almost full on a matinee performance at the end of the Pitlochry Season. There was sustained applause at the end.

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
All	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.	n/k	
All	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)?	n/a	

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	Very suitable
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	A very full programme for the entire season plus an individual show programme
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.	Well promoted as part of the Pitlochry season
Ease of booking and payment	Tickets booked by internet - very easy
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	Once in Pitlochry the venue is easy to find and to park. Public transport might be a little difficult
External signage and signposting	Very dramatic banners highlighting the season on the external building. Building in general well signposted
Internal directional signage	Fine
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	Adapted toilet available, but access seemed a little difficult with lots of stairs and changes of level. However the dedicated wheelchair spaces are good, allowing wheelchair users to sit alongside other members of their party without being separated and have an excellent view of the stage
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	Fine
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	Polite and attentive staff
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding ²	Well displayed in building and in programme

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.

Despite the surprisingly negative comments about Ayckbourn's script, we welcome the generally positive evaluation of this production. However, we would like to respond to some of the points made by the assessor that seem to stray towards subjective opinion.

Much of the artistic assessment seems to have been coloured by the assessor's expectation that the two principal characters – sisters - should have sounded the same. Our failure to satisfy this expectation "jarred" (1 – Vision and Imagination), "showed no coherence" (1 – Performers); the actors "seemed to struggle with the accents" (1 – Vision and Imagination); the play "would not have suffered from being moved further North" (1 – Direction). We would make the following points:

1. The decision to give Annabel a strong RP and her sister Miriam a relaxed RP was entirely conscious and deliberate. Rather than "struggling", both actors were rigorous in applying vocal differentiation, there being no logical basis for an assumption that two siblings, separated at the ages of nine and fifteen, would sound the same when they meet thirty five years later. We wonder why the assessor would automatically assume this vocal differentiation was a technical failure on the part of two highly experienced actors, not a deliberate creative decision?
2. The decision not to give Annabel's voice an Australian influence but heighten her natural RP instead was again entirely deliberate. Given her personality, it was far more likely that Annabel would have reinforced her upper middle class identity while living in Tasmania than let herself become vocally influenced by local notes and tones – something the British have been doing throughout the world for centuries.
3. There was no internal or external evidence in either the play or the production that the piece "was set in the home counties": that is an assumption made by the assessor based, presumably, on the fact that the two sisters spoke RP variants. Ayckbourn's only stipulation is that Alice (Lorna McDevitt) should be Northern, to separate her from the world in which the two sisters have been raised. The piece could have been set anywhere in Britain, from Perthshire to Cornwall.
4. Not one other response to this production has questioned the difference in the two sisters' vocal qualities. Such responses have included extensive critical response in the media, substantial audience feedback (both written and verbal) and another SAC evaluation.

We would also wish to make the following additional comments:

- The assessor misrepresents the programme note when asserting that "the stated aim of the play was to make the audience laugh, cry and be afraid" (1 – Script). The note actually states "[Ayckbourn] has a go at combining all three". The success of any playwright's ambition is for an audience to determine.
- The assertion that "access seemed a little difficult with lots of stairs and changes of level"

(2 – Access) is entirely false: all of PFT`s principal facilities – car park, main entrance, foyers, Box Office, shop, catering facilities, WCs for disabled users and auditorium – offer easy access for wheelchair users.