

ARTISTIC EVALUATION

This evaluation is intended to represent an objective aesthetic judgement. **Specialist advisors and officers should avoid making judgements based on their own personal tastes and preferences wherever possible.**

Artist/Company: Pitlochry Festival Theatre Company

Venue: Pitlochry Festival Theatre

Title of Event: *The Life of Stuff*

Type of Event: Performance

Date of Visit: 14th October 2009

Overall Rating: **Very 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.)

I think this was a well-produced version of a good Scottish play. I think it presented some challenges to sections of the audience in terms of its content. Overall the production values were strong and it added up to a satisfying evening of theatre. I thought that the ensemble gave a very good account of themselves and convincingly conveyed the characters and the social milieu. I think the plot of the play is not entirely satisfactory but the production elements were strong enough to carry these inherent, minor, weaknesses.

Name: David Taylor
Scottish Arts Council Officer

Date: 17 November 2009

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 on 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 future 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:

Very poor- standard falls well below what is acceptable.

Poor - not well conceived and executed

Satisfactory

Good - well conceived and executed

Very Good – well conceived and executed to a very good standard

Excellent – Inspiring and executed to an exceptionally 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</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of ideas if you have seen other work of this artist(s)/ company before, please comment on any relevant comparisons 	Very Good	<p>I have seen this play before and I would endorse the proposition that it deserved another production. It is a powerful and affecting piece of theatre- not always comfortable for an audience but definitely rewarding. I would say that I enjoyed this production more than the original premiere that I saw.</p> <p>As a near-contemporary piece it differs from much of the company's previous work and its setting in the lower ranges of urban society makes it challenging stylistically, running counter to the customary company style. That said it has a strong narrative and the presentation was naturalistic and therefore theatrically it sits within the conventions that the company normally employs.</p>
All (if relevant)	<p>Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does it fit within the artistic vision of the organisation? If the event is part of a Festival, please say how it contributes to the overall programme. 	Good	<p>The piece forms part of the Homecoming season that PFT has presented this year as a "celebration of Scottish playwrights and authors" and Scotland's "culture and its identity..." I think that <i>Life of Stuff</i> sat well enough alongside the other 20th century work, and Liz Lochhead's 2004 piece <i>Good Things</i>, affording a range of settings, writing styles and genres. The overall mix was good although I do not think that <i>Good Things</i> would be regarded as definitive Lochhead, nor <i>Life of Stuff</i> as exemplifying the highest achievement of the last 20 years in Scottish playwrighting.</p>
All	<p>Success of event against stated aims of project and/or performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does it relate to information contained in the programme, the website or other printed material? How well did it communicate the artistic themes? How did the event originate eg from the exhibiting/ producing organisation, from the artist or from commission? <p>Education events – see ¹below for definition</p>	Good	<p>This production was perhaps the second professional production of this piece, although I believe it has had at least one college production. It represents therefore a welcome outing for a piece of contemporary writing. The Director relates the piece to the tradition of Jacobean revenge tragedy, perhaps offering the audience a reference point that will help them engage with the piece. The programme commentary also refers to <i>Trainspotting</i> thus providing a second point of contact for a possibly nervous public.</p> <p>I think one of the weaknesses of the play is that it does not clearly present a single protagonist and it lacks a compelling dilemma or problem. The situation of Fraser and Janice is certainly critical, but I do not think that it comes across as the central driver for the piece. And the dilemma of whether Dobie should kill the two unwitting murderers is introduced late in the action and is therefore not a primary plot issue. As such, the play does not carry the same narrative drive that a revenge tragedy would, and so in those terms it is difficult to make it work entirely successfully. There is a rather aimless</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
			<p>narrative line involving the characters Evelyn and Holly and this makes sections of the play a little flabby.</p> <p>That said, I thought that the production created a believable and engaging sense of place and milieu. The characterization was good- an achievement in that the writing is at times complex and rich in its portrayal of character. I do think that the production created a world that was comparable in its repellent vigour to that of <i>Trainspotting</i> and so that comparison stood up.</p>
All	Performers/tutors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the expertise of the performers? Where performers are amateur, please reflect this in your comments. • How successfully did the performer(s) communicate with and engage the audience? • In your view, was an artist as a tutor key to the success of the workshop? 	Very Good	I thought that the cast were universally strong, with good urban Scots accents, good physical skills for the slapstick business and well-tempered well-pitched performances.
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the work original? • How was the space used? • How many dancers were there and how were they used? • How long was the piece? 		N/A
Theatre	Script Please comment on this for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new work • second productions • classics where the original has been substantially changed 	Very Good	See comments above. The writing is sharp and realises a believable set of characters and authentic-seeming dialogue. The use of language is good and at times very witty. There was a strong sense of irony and self-deprecation in the characters and this contributed effectively to the comedy.
Theatre, Dance	Direction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the work well interpreted? • Was it well cast? • Was it well presented? 	Very Good	<p>All aspects of the direction (John Durnin) were strong. The physical business was well managed and the space used well. The shortish scenes were moved along swiftly. The suicide of Leonard was rather perfunctory and could easily have slipped by unnoticed - perhaps this section would have benefitted from a little more writing.</p> <p>As noted above the casting was strong and overall this was a well-presented piece.</p>
Dance, Theatre	Use of music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the music/ sound used enhance the production? • Is it live or recorded? 	Good	Good use of recorded music and an interesting sound design that supported the piece well.
Dance, Theatre	Design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were the costumes, set and lighting? • How did it work in the venue? • Was it technically proficient? (eg lighting and sound cues, etc). 	Very Good	<p>Good quality costumes (Charles Cusick Smith), appropriate to character and period. The set was impressive and create the right atmosphere as well as the required playing spaces. All lighting and sound cues appeared to work well. I thought the fade on the lift's interior light worked well to create the illusion of movement and the background lights at scene changes threw a suitably sinister glow.</p> <p>There was a small problem with the lift door near the end- but this was handled by the cast. Clearly the door's robustness could not carry it through the</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			final performance.
All	<p>Quality of Public Engagement</p> <p>Performing Arts/Education -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the production/event targeted at a particular audience? • Was the production /event appropriate for the audience/participants? • Were you/ engaged/inspired? • Did the audience/ participants appear to be engaged/inspired? • What was their response? • Approximately how many people were there? • Did there appear to be a broad mix of people – age, cultural diversity or disabled? • Are BSL/captioned/audio described performances offered as part of the run/tour/? If so how many? • What activities or supporting materials were available to enhance the experience of the event eg workshops, artist's talks, discussion groups programmes, on line info? • Were these targeted at specific age groups? <p>Education/learning events: In addition, please provide comments on the following (if appropriate):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was it taught/led eg one to one, group, child centred? • What was the composition of the participant group – age range, gender mix? • Is it strategically linked to the curriculum or national policy areas e.g. Early Years, Community Learning & Development • What learning/skills development took place? • What was the quality of the art produced by the participants? • Did the workshop tutor have a teaching plan for the session and/or project? • How were participants recruited? • Did participants' views and choices help inform the structure and content of the project? <p>Crafts/Visual Arts Use of equipment, space and overall layout/hang?</p>	Satisfactory	<p>The house looked half to two thirds full. The audience appeared to be a fairly typical PFT audience with a preponderance of people in the 60+ age range. In the first act there was a distinct lack of audible response - suggesting that the comedy was not working for many. At the interval a sizeable minority left – with many showing their bewilderment and disapproval in their facial expressions. I heard a number of negative comments.</p> <p>That said, the response in the second act was much more engaged and one might say that the audience came to life- whether that was as a result of the nature of the second act or the departure of the members of the audience that were not engaged, it is hard to say. By the end, the majority of the audience was clearly engaged and gave the show a more than respectable applause with one or two standing and several clapping above their heads.</p> <p>There was a season programme and a single show programme with a Director's note in and a commentary on the play in both, as well as the normal cast and artistic team information. The quality of these publications is high.</p> <p>Induction loop, personal amplifiers and audio description are all offered. BSL is not referred to in the public information.</p> <p>A programme of backstage tours and post show talks is on offer.</p>

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								
Location and suitability of the venue for the event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route? Are the spaces clean? What were the sight lines like? How big was it? 	Good								
Information/ interpretive material at venue— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there programmes, posters and displays about the event? Is there information on the venue's website? 	Yes- effective banners and visual material inside and out.								
Publicity/ pre-publicity – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What leaflets, posters, websites, did you see the event listed in? What publicity materials are produced? Is it easy to understand? Where can you get the information? Is there Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding ²? <p>Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event and comment on the company/organisation's website.</p>	Received general mailing with comprehensive information. Sac funding acknowledged on inside front cover of the season programme. The individual show programme does not acknowledge funders. SAC funding is acknowledged on the "What's On" page of the website.								
Ease of booking and payment	Good- pleasant box office staff								
Timing of the event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience? Was the length appropriate? 	Yes								
Signage and signposting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the entrance clearly marked? Is there clear internal directional signage? Is there Braille signage or signage for audio loops? 	Signage generally good- I did not notice any Braille signage								
Access and provision for disabled people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please insert yes/no in the boxes to reflect what you notice about the venue/event <p>Please add in any additional comments below the table</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many 	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>BSL interpretation</td> <td>No</td> <td>Audio description of performances</td> <td>Yes</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Yes/No		Yes/No	BSL interpretation	No	Audio description of performances	Yes
	Yes/No		Yes/No						
BSL interpretation	No	Audio description of performances	Yes						

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.

Criteria	Comment			
BSL/captioned/audio described performances are there at the venue?	Captioning	No	Lift/ramp	yes
	Accessible toilets	yes	Accessible marketing materials eg website or alternative formats eg large print, Plain English	no
Customer service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was the quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering) • If possible, comment on how responsive they were to the needs of disabled customers? 	Good			

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.

In response to certain points made in this evaluation, PFT would comment as follows:

1 - Vision and imagination of work

The suggestion that "as a near contemporary piece it differs from much of the company's previous work" may create a false impression as to the amount of contemporary work that PFT produces. **The Life Of Stuff** premiered in 1992. In the last three years, PFT has produced six other works of the same vintage or younger: **Good Things** (2004); **Arcadia** (1994); **Outlying Islands** (2002); **Taking Sides** (1995); **Passing Places** (1997) and **Snake In The Grass** (2002). Add in the world première of **Whisky Galore – A Musical!** and since 2007, 44% of PFT's own-produced work has been "near contemporary".

1 - Vision and imagination of work

The low status, contemporary urban context of **The Life Of Stuff** does indeed differentiate this piece from those mentioned above and in that sense, it might be said to run "counter to the customary company style". However, the suggestion that this fact might have been "stylistically challenging" for PFT doesn't reflect the experience of those who actually created the production

1 – Success of event against stated aims of project and/or performance

The play certainly lacks a traditional narrative structure – that is one of its most identifiable characteristics – using instead the idea of consequence for its narrative drive: everything flows from the characters' reactions to the supposed 'murder' of Sneddon. Given that fact, it would perhaps be unwise to look for the "single protagonist" of more traditional theatre forms.

1 - Direction

Leonard's murder - he does not commit suicide – takes place between scenes, the author relying on the dialogue between Holly and Evelyn in the scene immediately following to relate (with some relish) that he has been pushed off the roof by wee Raymond. Again, this is not a traditional use of narrative form (unless by traditional you mean Sophoclean tragedy), but by dispatching Leonard in this manner, the playwright very cleverly turns him, in one unseen moment, from a raging, vengeful sadist into a banal irrelevance, a fleeting memory whose demise is not even worth watching.