



## 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:** Benchtours

**Venue:** Royal Lyceum Theatre

**Title of Event:** **The First To Go**

**Type of Event:** Performance

**Date of Visit:** 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2008

**Overall Rating:** **Competent**

This was a potentially challenging and ground-breaking production that could have said much about society's view of disabled people, both in a historical context and in terms of present day attitudes. I feel the production was let down to a large extent by a script that was too long and heavily laboured in its approach to raising the audience's awareness of this issue. I think the company slightly underestimate the public's awareness of how disabled people were treated in the holocaust, though perhaps I'm just acutely aware of these events. The play was also presented in a way that was quite predictable.

Overall I feel this was a missed opportunity to make individuals, even those who might consider themselves to be liberal, question themselves and their beliefs about disabled people. A few moments in the production touched upon interesting ideas of the desire to have a disabled child and the divides between disabled and non-disabled people, but these were insufficiently explored.

I just did not find the play to be challenging, informative or entertaining – surely a piece of theatre should be at least one of these?

Name: Robert Softley – Equalities Officer

Date: 29/05/2008

Specialist Advisor

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	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	Potentially interesting and previously unexplored subject matter – the Nazis treatment of the disabled is undoubtedly a highly emotive subject. However, this production felt very didactic and didn't engage me on an emotional level. Having previously seen 'Mother Courage', this production felt less developed as a piece.
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.	n/a	
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 <sup>1</sup> below for guidance	Competent	"...challenge as well as entertain" – The production may have been challenging to an audience member who was unaware of these events and issues, but the way in which they were presented limited their relevance to modern society. The play was funny in one or two places, but I do not feel that it gave overall satisfaction or entertained.
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 quality of the actors was, on the whole, very good, with particularly strong performances from Nick Field and Alan Clay. The group of inmates were believable as a cohort and overall this felt like a strong ensemble piece.
Dance, Theatre	Choreography/Use of choreography - originality, use of space, number and use of dancers, length of piece, etc	Good	The minimal use of choreography was appropriate and well executed in recreating the particular period. When the non-disabled performers were then joined by wheelchair-using actors in the dance, a powerful but subtle message of exclusion was conveyed.
Theatre	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions. Relevant to classics where the original has been substantially changed.	Poor	For me, the script was the principal downfall of this production. At over three hours in length, and with little in the form of narrative action during act one, it lacked much dramatic tension and drive. Too much was said in the form of direct audience address with little room for character interaction and relationship development.
Theatre, Dance	Direction - Concerns issues of interpretation, casting and presentation.	Competent	The production was well moved with a good use of the open set and stage. However, the production overall felt very predictable and exactly what you would expect of a play about Second World War Germany. This severely limited any potential for modern-day relevancy.

<sup>1</sup> 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
Dance, Theatre	Use of music – appropriateness and effect of sound or music (whole/part, live/recorded) to the production.	Good	Music was used extensively throughout the show and underpinned many moments very well. It was effective through its lack of intrusion.
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.	Competent	The set felt quite basic given the experience of the company. It was used well but, in a similar way to the production overall, the design felt quite predictable for a play with this subject matter. Perhaps an opportunity was missed here to increase the relevancy of the piece.
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	The production ran very well technically with no noticeable hiccups on it's opening night.
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>		<p>A good proportion of disabled people and other interested individuals. It appeared to be received fairly well though it was clear that others also felt it was too long.</p> <p>The nudity of the disabled characters near the start of act one clearly made even this (presumably) liberal audience uncomfortable, which I see as being a good thing. This meant that most people were challenged, though not sufficiently for the piece as a whole</p>
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/a	Post-show discussion was on offer but I was unable to attend.
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	This felt like a challenging production for the Lyceum and they should be applauded for taking this risk as well as encouraged to do likewise in the future.
Information/ interpretive material at venue - programmes, displays etc.	Programme was of a high quality – cost £1 which felt a bit unreasonable.
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.	Good marketing/publicity material. Cohesive look and feel with the production. Website was easy to find and navigate.
Ease of booking and payment	Good – able to reserve without paying. UNABLE to reserve wheelchair space without buying reduced price ticket – I wanted to pay more!
Location of venue – eg is it easy to find? Is it on a main transport route?	Very good.
External signage and signposting	Very good.
Internal directional signage	Very good.
Access and provision for disabled people – what can you see?	Fairly good access – quite uneven inside. Staff a little too eager to help.
Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	Far too long – didn't sustain.
Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering)	Good.
Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding <sup>2</sup>	Logo not on programme but was on posters/flyers.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

Frankly we are shocked and amazed by Robert's comments – his assessment does scant justice to either the production or its receiving venue. We find his assessment ungenerous, inaccurate and contradictory.

Nabil initially contacted **bench**tours on the recommendation of SAC, following an initial SAC assessment of the script for *The First To Go*. This original assessment described the piece as '**an interesting and thought-provoking script... A complex project showing a great deal of careful thought and historical research.**'. The Equalities team at SAC were very keen for the play to receive a full production and granted significant funds to enable this to happen. However Robert, attending this performance as a representative of the Equalities team, describes the script as '**the principal downfall of this production**'. To be presented with this assessment and a comment of **n/a** regarding Curatorial/ Programme Selection given this history and the fact that *The First To Go* has been so greatly advocated by the SAC seems incredible. This is a script specifically written to examine the previously unexplored history of the persecution of people with disabilities and equally, to give **real** opportunities for physically and learning disabled performers to feature on main stages. That these disparaging and unhelpful comments come from someone who is the SAC's '**Equalities Officer**' is incredibly disappointing.

In overview Robert states that '**the company slightly underestimate the public's awareness of how disabled people were treated in the holocaust**'. He immediately goes on to say that this is '**previously unexplored subject matter.**'

He then goes on to assert, that he, '**did not find the play challenging, informative or entertaining**'. This is totally contrary to opinions given in audience feedback, questionnaires, word of mouth and media reviews.

In a separate review of the production written by Robert for Disability Arts Online he suggests that '**unless we're forced to question how far things have come since 1933, we can easily dismiss this subject to the history books**' that is the aim of this play and our feedback from audiences suggests that the play did indeed encourage audiences to question how much things have changed.

Further, to say this was less developed as a piece than **bench**tours production of ***Mother Courage*** – a play written over 50 years ago, and subsequently developed by one of the greatest European playwrights ever – is extremely naïve.

Finally, it is astonishing that the fact that this production is captioned in all performances, and audio described at every venue, should receive no mention at all. Equally, that fault should be found with the Lyceum's concessionary ticket offer for disabled customers (Robert may well have "wanted to pay more" – but, equally, the SAC were reimbursing his ticket). An over-eagerness of staff to help is similarly disparaged. Surely, if venues are to be encouraged to offer concessionary rates to encourage new/ diverse audiences, and to provide disability awareness training for staff,

then narrow, subjective comments like this are not helpful.