



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:	Stellar Quines
Venue:	Music Hall, Assembly Rooms Edinburgh
Title of Event:	The Girls of Slender Means
Type of Event:	Drama Adaptation
Date of Visit:	29 / August / 2009
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.)

An (over?) ambitious approach to a risky project. Muriel Spark's novel does not immediately suggest adaptation. While the multiple cast, and time- and place- shifts were handled admirably, the whole still felt like a novel staged rather than a new creation, a play. The fine acting, however, deft use of music and general stagecraft – and the ambition itself – make Stellar Quines' production commendable. I would prefer that they try, and almost pull it off, than not attempting it at all.

Name: Chris Dolan **Date 06 / 07 / 09**
Specialist Advisor

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	Vision and imagination of work <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 	Good	<p>Returning to Spark's 1960s novel is timely and valuable, and Stellar Quines is the right company to tackle a stage adaptation. The themes of women's lives, war and lost innocence, beliefs, have powerful echoes in 2009. It is more than merely interesting to revisit a 60s female artist's vision – we re-evaluate where we have come from, and how little we have travelled.</p> <p>The themes of the book came through strongly in the play – perhaps a little too strongly. With such a large cast no single character was with us long enough for us to feel any real connection. And so the play felt a little abstract. An important element of the novel, however, is female relationships <i>collectively</i>, which did succeed here rather better. If the novel had been stripped down a little more we may have had a more powerful sense of the drama – but would then lose complexity and breadth. Judith Adams, Muriel Romanes and SQ knew this of course and had to make a choice.</p> <p>An important piece, at a crucial time, attracting full and enthusiastic houses. Stellar Quines at their most ambitious and, if only at moments, most subtle.</p>
All (if relevant)	Curatorial/ programming vision/ selection <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. 	Excellent	<p>With the renewed interest in Spark at present (due partly to the launch of Stannard's biography) Stellar Quines timing is excellent. They could have chosen an easier book to adapt (<i>Memento Mori</i>, <i>Driver's Seat</i>, <i>Loitering...?</i>); <i>Slender Means</i> was a wise, if bold decision.</p>
All	Success of event against stated aims of project and/or performance <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>	Satisfactory	<p>The novel moves back and forth in time, and between the frame story of Farrington and Joanna Childe. The play attempts to do the same thing – a little slavishly at times.</p> <p>The humour of Spark's novel found a voice in the stage version; so, too, to a lesser extent, the final tragedy. What was lost was the selfishness of the group and the women it contained. Stripping down nearly every strand and character of the novel, rather than stripping some of them away altogether and concentrating on others, led to some confusion, and an overall thinness. A nod in the direction of the themes of loss of youth and innocence, female camaraderie, and absolutist beliefs.</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	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? 	Good	<p>Nearly all of the cast (far too many to mention individually here – around 20 speaking characters played by 12 actors) had too little time, and too little focus, to do more than give cameo glimpses at their characters. That, nonetheless, they did very well – a combination of excellent staging and good acting deftly ‘summing up’ complex characters. Farrington suffered the most, I felt, by this concision. Jamie Lee played well enough, but the fact that he appeared on stage in two other roles detracted from the importance of Farrington in the drama.</p> <p>Joanna Childe (Melody Grove), in the novel, is something of a mystery and a cipher – all the more so, and a little lost, in this busy adaptation. The force and meaning of her death – and reactions to it – were too faint.</p> <p>But the group scenes, the quick-flicking between roles and scenarios were extremely well realised. The adaptation communicated well the claustrophobia of the girls’ hostel, their individual dreams and self-deceptions, their poverty, and the vacuity of the local beat-poet scene. The entire cast combined admirably in evoking a very particular, and romantic, time and place, though no individual actor was stretched.</p>
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? 	Excellent	<p>Janice Parker’s choreography was one of the play’s strongest points. Not only the set-pieces, which were witty, but the use of movement and space throughout. It helped us track time and pinpoint locations.</p> <p>If I have one reservation – the use of a hand-held stage-window worked well enough for the first half of the play, but its significance is so strong by the end of the book (especially the anti-erotic escape scene) that the device felt too flimsy.</p> <p>Generally, though, in a very busy stage, amid very dense storytelling, the show’s movement lent light and space.</p>
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 	Satisfactory	<p>Better over-ambitious than under-ambitious. Still, stripping away a few of the characters and some of the scenes would have helped the focus enormously. Perhaps a little too respectful (understandably so) of the author.</p> <p>The script was at its best when it was fast and furious; the women’s alternating closeness and distance, the big set scenes, the comedy. As with the production as a whole, the adaptation did not give space for the darker and bigger picture to breathe. To threaten and move us.</p>
Theatre, Dance	Direction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the work well interpreted? • Was it well cast? • Was it well presented? 	Good	<p>The production felt, at times, like watching a plate-spinner, keeping 20-odd plates going – and you never once felt that Muriel Romanes was going to let one drop.</p> <p>Together with the whole design team, the direction conjured up wartime London terrifically. The drama had pace, complexity and wit. In taking on too much it lacked a little depth, finally, and heart</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
			<p>(though, admittedly, Spark's book is not the warmest of stories). Visually, and work with actors, consistently nailed moments and pauses, and filled in where the script was a little too abrupt.</p> <p>The enormity of the final act – even misunderstood and only half known by the characters themselves – wasn't quite there for me. But a time, a place, and the bumpy ride from wartime optimism to cold war realism were brought vividly to life.</p> <p>The adaptation worked best, I think, in a visual way – giving hints of the world to come, the compromises made, the acceptance of guilt. This was down to the direction, design, and performances.</p>
Dance, Theatre	<p>Use of music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the music/ sound used enhance the production? • Is it live or recorded? 	Excellent	<p>Philip Pinsky's music worked itself in well with the overall conception of the piece. A 40s feel when that was called for, timelessness when not. Fun when the show was fun, darkening as the story turned tragic. A filmic sense of danger stood in for the time-stressed production's lapses.</p>
Dance, Theatre	<p>Design</p> <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). 	Excellent	<p>A challenge, in every way. Space, time, changes in points-of-view, overlapping stories and characters – the design took a very demanding story, and perhaps more demanding script, but found a way not only to cope, but to bring these women and their experiences to life.</p> <p>Lighting nostalgic when it had to be; not when it didn't; stage design coped with big differences in era and placing; the space used imaginatively.</p>
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? 	Good	<p>Despite all the above – stagecraft, direction, performances, music, a goldmine of a source, it still has to be said that the piece as a whole didn't quite come off on the night that I saw it.</p> <p>As professional a production as you will see, even on the highest level of the Fringe. Everything worked. Everything cued. Work and imagination had gone into the production – and I thoroughly enjoyed that.</p> <p>But it seemed to me that something basic was missing. An essential theatricality that perhaps should have been picked up on at a very early stage during, or before, rehearsals.</p> <p>Full house – and I believe it sold out its run. A satisfied audience, the day I was there, but not an electrified one.</p> <p>As for education / outreach I hope – as no doubt SQ hope – that a good proportion of the play's public will now read the book.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
	<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>		

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								
<p>Location and suitability of the venue for the event</p> <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? 	<p>Assembly Halls well kept space, especially during the Festival, and the music hall one of the better spaces used.</p> <p>Easy to get to, between Waverly and Haymarket, on bus routes.</p> <p>Capacious, for a Festival venue.</p>								
<p>Information/ interpretive material at venue—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there programmes, posters and displays about the event? Is there information on the venue's website? 	<p>Well marketed via the Festival, the Assembly Rooms themselves, and Stellar Quines.</p> <p>Good hit rate on web.</p>								
<p>Publicity/ pre-publicity –</p> <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>	<p>Again, well marketed.</p>								
<p>Ease of booking and payment</p>	<p>Extremely helpful staff who sorted out pleasantly a booking problem of my making.</p>								
<p>Timing of the event</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience? Was the length appropriate? 	<p>Yes to both.</p>								
<p>Signage and signposting</p> <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? 	<p>Well signed, and the public well shepherded.</p>								
<p>Access and provision for disabled people</p> <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</p>	<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></td> <td>Audio description of performances</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Yes/No		Yes/No	BSL interpretation		Audio description of performances	
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BSL interpretation		Audio description of performances							

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			
comments below the table <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many BSL/captioned/audio described performances are there at the venue? 	Captioning		Lift/ramp	
	Accessible toilets		Accessible marketing materials eg website or alternative formats eg large print, Plain English	
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? 	All staff helpful, efficient and pleasant, even during the Festival rush.			

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.