

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: Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh
Title of Event: *The Girls of Slender Means* by Muriel Spark, adapted by Judith Adams
Type of Event: Theatre
Date of Visit: 15th August 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 – ie 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 a bold and ambitious production. It was well cast and performed and imaginatively directed. In the end, however, it didn't quite work for me. In my view, the weakness lay mainly with the script. It would appear to have been a challenging book to adapt, but it suffered from the common problem in adaptations of having too many short scenes and too many sketchy characters. I felt that I needed to know the book to appreciate the production, indicating that it was not entirely successful in making the transition from novel to a piece of theatre that could succeed in its own terms. This was a borderline Good/Very Good and I have probably been more generous in writing up than I actually felt at the time.

Name: Nikki Axford
Specialist Advisor

Date: 5th October 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	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 	Very Good	<p>This was a very ambitious and imaginative project with many interesting ideas. It was nearly a beautiful, elegiac piece of theatre, but in the end it left me strangely disappointed and dissatisfied.</p> <p>It was lyrical and evocative, combining script, music, movement and visuals, but, whilst I admired it, it did not engage me completely. I had not read the novel and approached this as a piece of theatre that needed to succeed on its own terms: it did so only partially and I suspect that it will have had much more impact on someone who had read the book.</p> <p>I have seen several of the company's previous productions. This was an interesting development in style, scale and ambition.</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>An excellent choice, linked to the Year of Homecoming and benefitting from renewed interest in Muriel Spark following her death in 2006 and publication of a new biography. It also fits very well with the company's artistic aims, putting women's voices onstage and "exploring the boundaries between conventional theatre and dance, music, physical theatre and new media" [<i>website</i>].</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? 	Good	<p>There was no programme available and only limited information on the website. Here the play is described as "<i>a bold and witty celebration of Muriel Spark's literary spirit and genius</i>". It also states "<i>Adams' adaptation of Spark's novel - about sex and the availability of it, money and the lack of it – is as chilling as an Arctic winter; slashing the face of romantic relationships like flying glass, it elegantly captures a mysterious and seductive world driven by fear and foreboding.</i>"</p> <p>Whilst the production as a whole was bold and witty in places, the script was not as successful in meeting these aims and ambitions. Nor were these themes communicated entirely successfully – they were there, but not as themes.</p> <p>There is no information available as to how the production originated.</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? • 	Excellent	<p>The performers were excellent. There seemed to be so many characters flitting across the stage and most of them were sketchily drawn in the script. However, the performers mostly managed to convey a sense of character and moment through movement and voice.</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
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? 	Very good	As well as some formal dance routines, movement (by Janice Parker) was used successfully throughout the piece to convey character and period.
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	I have not read the novel, but was left with the impression that this production would have meant so much more if I had. It appears to be a complex book and must have been very challenging to adapt. The script was disjointed, full of short scenes, sketching out the story in snapshots. This gave an (intentionally) filmic quality to the piece, but also had an alienating effect. There were so many characters that at times it was difficult to remember who was who and I longed to know fewer of them in a little more depth, to be invited to care a bit more about them rather than just observe them superficially. Perhaps the adapter could have been a bit more ruthless in terms of what she included in the adaptation, leaving out some of the lesser characters.
Theatre, Dance	Direction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the work well interpreted? • Was it well cast? • Was it well presented? 	Very good	The direction was bold, ambitious and imaginative. In the end though, I wonder whether there were just too many characters and too many elements needing to be pulled together in this production. It was very well cast.
Dance, Theatre	Use of music <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the music/ sound used enhance the production? • Is it live or recorded? 	Very good	Music/sound design by Philip Pinsky was evocative and helped create mood and mystery as well as a sense of time and place.
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). 	Satisfactory	<p>Design by Merie Hensel consisted of a series of sliding partitions used to create smaller spaces, suggesting things hidden behind closed doors and windows. Design choices would no doubt have been dictated by the Festival requirements of the Assembly Rooms, which usually allow very little set up time. It was simple, but added little to the production and with so many short scenes; the almost constant shifting around the stage at times became distracting. The video projection (Finn Ross) added little except perhaps a sense of mystery. It appeared to be intentionally fuzzy and unclear, suggestive of events and people unseen, but evoked mystery rather than the fear and foreboding we are told characterised the time.</p> <p>The costumes were satisfactory, but, given the constraints of the physical setting, they might have been more interesting. The Schiaparelli dress suspended above the action at the start stole the show at times.</p>
All	Quality of Public Engagement Performing Arts/Education - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the production/event targeted at a particular 	Good	<p>The production was presented at the Assembly Rooms for a Festival audience. It was excellent festival fare and appropriate for this venue.</p> <p>The venue was almost full, with a fairly typical</p>

Artform	Criteria	Rating	Comments and key reasons for rating
	<p>audience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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>festival audience of varying ages. The audience response was generally good, varying between enthusiastic and bemused.</p> <p>I could not find any information about BSL, captioned, audio described performances or supporting activities.</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>The Assembly Rooms is a central, high profile festival venue and a good location for this event.</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>There were posters at the venue and information on the website.</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 ¹? <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>There was information in the Assembly Rooms Festival brochure. Also good preview coverage in the press.</p> <p>There was no acknowledgement of SAC funding on the cast/information sheet given out at the venue. There was no other programme available.</p> <p>There is acknowledgment of funding by SAC National Lottery on the news page on the SQ website. The SAC and SAC Lottery logos appear on the website. The website has minimal information about the show – I would have liked to read more about the production process, the director's vision for the piece and more background information. There is only one production photograph on the website and not a particularly good one for this purpose.</p>								
<p>Ease of booking and payment</p>	<p>Fine</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>Timing was fine. It lasted approx 80 minutes, straight through, which suits the festival, but the production might have benefitted from being a longer play of two halves, with more opportunity to develop the themes, characters and story.</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>OK. Better information on where to queue would have been helpful.</p> <p>There is no information about access on any of the websites.</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 	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> <th></th> <th>Yes/No</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>BSL</td> <td>n/k</td> <td>Audio</td> <td>n/k</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Yes/No		Yes/No	BSL	n/k	Audio	n/k
	Yes/No		Yes/No						
BSL	n/k	Audio	n/k						

¹ 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			
Please add in any additional comments below the table <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many BSL/captioned/audio described performances are there at the venue? 	interpretation		description of performances	
	Captioning	No	Lift/ramp	No
	Accessible toilets	n/k	Accessible marketing materials eg website or alternative formats eg large print, Plain English	n/k
	There is no information about access on any of the websites			
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? 	Fine.			

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.