

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL
SPECIALIST ADVISER ARTISTIC EVALUATION - DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: 7:84 Theatre Company at the Tron Theatre

Title of Event: 'Reasons to be Cheerful' by Martin McCardie

Type of Event: Performance

Date of Visit: 17th March 2004

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named below. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or a Council Officer, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work, to the management of the venue if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report may be made available to Scottish Arts Council Officers, Council and Committee members, and specialist advisors as appropriate. It will 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 Council to report on the overall performance of its Core 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 attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation

Competent– routine rather than especially interesting

Good –well conceived and executed.

Excellent –conceived and executed to a high standard.

1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event

1.1 Vision and Imagination.

<p>Rating for this section (<i>Please tick</i>)</p>		<p>The vision embodied in this show was very limited. The concept took a good, but dramatically unpromising book by Mark Steel, stretching it to the point of unrecognisability, adding all three characters, a setting, and jettisoning Mark Steel's articulacy, passion, and pragmatic, ruthlessly honest and self-deprecating sense of humour. The resulting story was of Bobby, on his 43rd birthday, being revisited by two people who, having formerly figured largely in his life, have become estranged to him. They are trapped in the building by a fire, and discuss the issues which drove their political commitment. The rest of the production marshalled around this concept was humdrum, particularly in comparison to the level of imagination employed in the Mark Steel's other work such as his 'Lectures' on Radio 4 and BBC4.</p>
<p>Poor</p>		

1.2 Clarity of Communication.

<p>Rating for this section (<i>Please tick</i>)</p>		<p>Given the speed at which the play was performed, we only got to know the characters superficially. The means of communication was entirely verbal, and urgently-needed possibilities to flesh out the production were ignored. Stagecraft was insufficient to avoid a certain lack of contact with the audience. Diction was sufficiently good.</p>
<p>Competent</p>		

You are also asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the event with specific reference to the following:

1.3 Script (particularly in relation to new work, or second productions).

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>Martin McCardie stated in the post-show discussion that his attempt to adapt this memoir was unsuccessful. He went to see Mark Steel, requesting the freedom to invent a dramatic situation around the recent historical events which the book chronicles. Mark Steel agreed that, as long as the tone of the book was maintained, he should have that freedom. The tone of the book is entirely driven by the incisively funny, angry, but ultimately self-effacing personality of Mark Steel, and I feel that this was boiled down to something very stock, in the character of Bobby, the protagonist of this piece.</p> <p>The debate amongst the three characters is non-stop, and there was a script sufficient to fuel the comedy, but in comparison to the early work of this company, which was always formally innovative, this piece was standard situation comedy. At the end of the show, I felt that there is a good reason that all TV sitcoms last no more than 30 minutes.</p>
<p>Poor</p>		

1.4 Direction

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>The handling of pace in this show was disastrous, and the show seemed to be a race to get the text said. Its speed pretty much prevented any kind of character development, and comic timing was thin on the ground. Blocking was also poor, actors tending to line up stagnantly across the stage, and gag lines were frequently delivered by characters whose faces could not be seen. The conception of the set, Bobby's flat, as a wall with graffiti, was a cliché, which was far more lazily-conceived than purposeful. At the times the comedy flagged, leaving time to be puzzled by the plausibility of things like the characters' entrapment in a burning skyscraper, or the curious relationship Bobby had with his doorkeeper over a malfunctioning two-way intercom mounted by his front door. A clear step away from realism, or sheer comic enthrallment would have prevented this.</p>
<p>Very poor</p>		

1.5 Standard of performers- where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		There was a time when 7.84 could rely on actors who were both politically committed and prodigiously talented. Without this talent the company's ability to seek out new audiences is hampered. The nature of this script required intense characterisation, and without it, the show became a list of jokes. The actors needed help in handling the comedy, which I feel they did not get.
Poor		

1.6 Use of music – in particular please comment on the quality and appropriateness of any original music composed for the production. Please indicate whether the music was performed live or recorded, in whole or in part, and what effect this had on the quality of the production.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		The music was recorded, and underlined the transitions between the action in Bobby's flat and the sequences displayed on the video monitor at the back of the set. It was used boldly, but was, in keeping with the set, also a cliché.
Competent		

1.7 Use of Movement or Choreography

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		The actors were very tense throughout. This meant they had no composure to solve problems like being demonstrative towards the highly-raked seating bank of the Tron. Nothing appeared to have been done to remedy this tension.
Poor		

1.8 Design – including set, costume and lighting design. Please take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue, and, where appropriate, the touring schedule.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>The set consisted of a sloping wall which swept round the back of Bobby's flat. This was the canvas for graffiti, and there were similarly-decorated masking flats behind it. Cleverly, a large widescreen monitor doubled as an audio-visual presentation screen and the window of Bobby's flat. The material on the presentation was familiar to documentary watchers. There was nothing revelatory about the design, nothing which developed, and seemed to support the erroneous idea that all graffiti is carried out as a legitimate protest by socialists. The sloped walls facilitated bold changes of colour with downlight, but this was the angle chosen for the general coverage, which was so steep as to render faces very badly at the extremities of the set. Vital comic moments were lost because of this.</p>
<p>Poor</p>		

1.9 Technical Standards – please comment on whether the production was professionally presented from a technical point of view.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>The set wobbled a lot, which was disappointing because this was not the first performance at the Tron. During the audio-visual presentation at the beginning of the show a red light came up on absolutely nothing, which might have been one of the more imaginative moments in the show. Video, sound and lighting were well-cued.</p>
<p>Competent</p>		

- 1.10 **Overall production** – was the production successful overall in relation to any stated aims (e.g. in the programme or other printed material, and stated aims and objectives)

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Mark Steel's book takes a very encouraging and human stance on the justification, amid the difficulties, of organised protest. I can't help feeling that the success of the book has been hi-jacked by 7.84's political convictions , which have been a little too inflexible to acknowledge, or they have been insufficiently skilled to duplicate, it's special properties. I don't feel the company learned anything as a result of producing this piece, and it came as no surprise to see that the show had not attracted a general theatregoing audience and could only represent a morale-booster to those engaged in protest.
Poor		

- 1.11 **Was the performance appropriate for the audience?**

Yes, an audience clearly exists for this company, and it seems highly partizan, most arriving in groups. They cheered the company through each of it's political points. Perhaps this is an example of a show which is too appropriate for it's audience, since, on this viewing, the audience was very limited in its profile. A very few individuals came to the show, and the company claim some success in attracting young people who have not yet found a focus for their political dissatisfactions.

- 1.12 **Estimated size of audience and reaction to the production.**

About 40% attendance, most enjoyed it very much.

2. **Management of Event**

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and by the venue. Please answer, where relevant, with reference to the checklist below adding any other comments/observations you may have.

- 2.1 **Was the venue suitable for the event?**

Yes

2.2 Information/Interpretive material provided at the venue (e.g. programmes, displays etc)

- range, quantity and clarity.

All very good.

2.3 Publicity/Pre-Publicity for the Event (leaflets, posters, etc)

- range, content and when and where available. Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Please also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised. Comment on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information.

All seemed very good

2.4 Accessibility of the venue

- ease of payment

No problems. Staff were very friendly.

- location

Good

- external signposting

Good

- 1 internal directional signing

Good

- access and provision for disabled people

Good

- timing of event

Good

2.5 Customer service

- quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering).

Friendly, efficient.

3. Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding (if applicable)

Following is an extract from the Scottish Arts Council's conditions of grant for funded organisations:

"The company should acknowledge Scottish Arts Council funding in press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, notices display and exhibition materials, websites and advertising). Acknowledgement of the Scottish Arts Council grant must also be made in any secondary or indirect products arising from the revenue funding such as recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, and computer programmes etc. "

Please comment on whether the above conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.

Yes, they were.

4. Scoring

Vision and imagination	Poor
Communicating clearly	Competent
Script	Poor
Direction	Very poor
Standard of performers	Poor
Use of music	Competent
Use of movement	Poor
Design	Poor
Technical standards	Competent
Overall production	Poor
Audience reaction	Good
Overall score	Poor

Name: Ace McCarron

Date: 11/5/ 2004