



Scottish Arts Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION – DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: 7:84 at the Brunton Theatre

Title of Event: Boiling a Frog

Type of Event: (e.g. performance, work-in-progress, open rehearsal etc.) Performance

Date of Visit: Saturday 22nd March 2005; 8 pm;

Overall Rating (Please rate the production 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.)

Competent

Whilst 'Boiling a Frog' represents a significant improvement over the standards I witnessed attending a previous show, I do not feel that the company is displaying enough vision in, in this case, producing an adaptation of a highly-entertaining novel which also had a point to make.

Name: Ace McCarron

Date: 07/04/2005

Advisor

Scottish Arts Council Officer

Please tick the relevant title

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 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 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:

- 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, taking account of the following:

1.	Criteria	Rating	Comment and key reasons for rating
1.1	Vision and imagination	Poor	<p>Boiling a Frog' by Christopher Brookmyre is a novel which rides a deft course between plausibility and a portrayal of outrageous misconduct at the highest level of Scottish political life. A large part of the text consists of the author's convincingly knowledgeable take on the mechanism, contradiction and ridiculousness of the role of the news media with respect to a harrassed, confused, and sometimes self-interested government. This produces certain damaging interruptions to the plot, but this is redeemed by Brookmyre's convincing portrayal of the characters' function, and by the fact that most people would find it hilarious in the extreme.</p> <p>7:84 has decided to re-insert the word 'socialist' into its mission statement, and in choosing this piece, I am puzzled as to how much effect they imagined this production to achieve. Brookmyre's authorial voice in the novel (largely discarded in the process of adaptation) betrays left-wing committment, but there is little in the plot to directly expound, clarify, underline, or re-evaluate socialist thinking.</p> <p>As such, we might have been left with a lesson in the process by which the media can either monitor, annoy or bully politicians. This lesson would have been much more palatable had it been leavened by accessing the huge amount of comic potential this novel afforded.</p>
1.2	Clarity of Communication	Competent	<p>I had to stifle the urge to shout out 'Pardon?' several times during this performance. Some members of the cast had a strange filmic tendency to swallow their lines, which was irritating in a play where articulation of a complicated plot was vital. When viewed, the production had played in a variety of venues, so the size of the Brunton Theatre may not be cited as an excuse. Lighting was frequently dim enough to lose contact with characters' motives. Amongst the seasoned professionals in the cast, clarity was better.</p>

2. Strengths and Weaknesses

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the event with reference to the following:

2.	Criteria	Rating	Comment and key reasons for rating
2.1	Script – particularly in relation to new work or second productions	Competent	The backbone of the novel is authorial pontification. Occasionally the plot goes on hold, and there are certain big scenes which are not portrayed, such as the arrest of Scotland's First Minister. Christopher Deans made some attempt to give some of Brookmyre's highly-entertaining rant to the character of Jack Paralabane. This was forgivable, despite the slight distortion of character this produced, but was either limply unsustained, or jettisoned in the process of rehearsal. The remainder of the adaptation was routine, and occasionally confused. Why was Paralabane stabbed in his leather jacket whilst still in prison, for instance? All in all, there seemed to be a lack of vision in the adaptation, no special reason why this piece would work in any more valuable way when performed as a play, no astute focussing on the moments of hilarity, and no vehicle for fresh political insight.
2.2	Direction	Poor	Amid the process of manipulating a complicated, if rather clever, staging, Lorenzo Mele lacked the distance to assess what his production was achieving. It seems as though the process of the technical rehearsal had exhausted both the cast, and his imagination. The endless wheeling of furniture through doors and manipulation of scene change lighting was not slick enough to prevent significant lapses in pace, and it seems the sheer struggle of making all of this work, left no time to influence the overall shape of the play. Little attention was given to polishing the humour, or else it had been foolishly discarded, and there was a certain laziness about the portrayal of Ian Beadie, the conniving motor of the plot, who we were encouraged, by sinister music, to view more as menacing evil than as a comprehensible product of a decadent media tradition
2.3	Standard of Performers – where performers are not trained, please reflect this in you comments	Competent	Despite the projection problems noted above, everyone in the cast appeared committed, and confident. This deepened my sense of mystery as to why certain comic opportunities were being missed. Given the size of the push-pull tasks in executing the scene changes, and the sheer amount of costume changes the cast must be applauded, but I felt I could sense a certain resignation when it came to honing the comedy. None, I felt would consider this their best work.

2.4	Use of Music	Poor	The music was well-produced and atmospheric, but there wasn't enough variation in it to always produce a suitably appropriate ending to a scene, or a link to the next one. The tone was always sombre or menacing, and did much to prevent the momentum of comedy
2.5	Use of Movement/ Choreography	Good	The actors successfully portrayed a series of characters, so much so, that it came as a great surprise to see how few of them there were at the curtain call. Movement, and a laudable embodiment of costume played a useful part in this. Some more clever regime or convention would have assisted the scene changes.
2.6	Design ¹ – including set, costume and lighting design	Competent	The creation of space, the supplying of evidence of location, the provision of props, and the general standard of finish were of a high standard and represented quite a great deal of hard work. The show seemed to have also maintained its appearance well, after weeks on the road. Less good, as noted above, was the underestimation of how much a rehearsal task the design represented. The show was under-lit, but had some clever ideas like the portrayal of Ian Beadie's laser alarm system.
2.7	Technical Standards – was the production professionally presented from a technical point of view	Good	Generally good. There were a lot of clever hatches on the set, which opened to reveal a sense of location. Some of these were a bit sticky, but they represent a difficult maintenance job for a touring company. Prop setting must have been huge, and this ran well.
2.8	Audience Response – appropriateness of the production for the audience, estimate the size and reaction	Competent	The show was reasonably well-attended and received polite applause at the end. There was an absence of belly laughter, and I could gauge my response against an audience who, if they had not read the novel, might still respond freshly to situations and dialogue on view. I felt they weren't having a good enough night out. One couple had booked a table in the cafeteria, distinctive as the only one with cutlery, napkins and wine glasses, and they explained to a couple at the next table that they were Brookmyre fans. They sat next to me. Their response throughout was muted.

¹ Take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue and, where appropriate, the touring schedule

3. 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.

3.	Criteria	Comments
3.1	Suitability of the venue for the event	Entirely
3.2	Information/ interpretive material at venue	Good. There was a front-of House display, and the programmes were fine.
3.3	Publicity/ pre-publicity	The website wasn't much help. More information was forthcoming from the venues
3.4	Ease of booking and payment	Very easy
3.5	External signage and signposting	Very good
3.6	Internal directional signage	Very good
3.7	Access and provision for disabled people	Very good
3.8	Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	Fine
3.9	Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g., box office, front of house and bar/catering)	Box office staff, front of house and bar staff were helpful, professional and efficient.
3.10	Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council funding ²	Logo printed on programme.

² The 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, 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, computer programmes etc.”
Please comment on whether these conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.