

ARTISTIC EVALUATION – DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: 7:84 at the Brunton Theatre

Title of Event: Borderland

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

Date of Visit: Saturday 12th October 2005; 7.30 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

It was disappointing to witness the production of a text which, due to blunders in script development and tentative rehearsal, result in a show which under-achieved. The physical aspects of the production were better handled.

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Date: 14/10/2005

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	Competent	The conception of touring this neatly-conceived and responsibly-motivated play was a good one. It portrays the attempted evolution of two brothers, from being couriers for the IRA, into anything that won't get them killed. More literary imagination should have been employed in developing the more technical aspects of storytelling,
1.2	Clarity of Communication	Competent	The actor's diction was very good, especially considering the extent to which they were deploying industrial-strength Derry accents. Certain ambiguities in the script remained unresolved and I imagined that the rehearsal process might have addressed these. The dim nature of the lighting, particularly in act two, when the brothers are hiding out, may have

		<p>proved troublesome for elderly patrons in the rear rows. I was in row two, and found lighting levels on the borderline.</p> <p>Along with the rest of the very alert audience, I learned to listen very closely to the text, since so many questions were raised by turns in the plot, but at times such concentration was ill-rewarded, as some things were never explained. For instance we know how the boys' father and grandfather were killed in minor paramilitary actions, but we found out little about the mother except she was described as psychotic and died the night she went out punching windows. This certainly engaged my curiosity, but whether this had any bearing on the plot was a mystery.</p>
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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	<p>This production had a promising script which needed more literary management. It was a little too long, a little too repetitive, and far too little actually happened in the play. The author's stated intention of portraying 'the journey from the Armalite to the ballot box', was laudable, but I question the vehicle of comedy for such an enterprise. References to armed violence still shock, and in this production, when they eventually arrived, seemed a heavy-handed tool, attempting to imbue the backbiting dialogue with more significance.</p> <p>Not being a Harry Potter expert, I did not know that a basilisk kills by staring at its victim. This was presumably the central, and final, metaphor of the play; that the motives of the sectarian killers melt away under stern scrutiny. As such, this is a well-constructed stage conceit, and worthy of the effort put in to realise it. However, all I was told about basilisks, in the course of the play, was that they can possibly be killed by weasels. Not much help. Certain plot points are blind alleys. Ciaran's sudden obsession with demonology does not seem to unhinge him significantly more than one feels it normally would have, on the entrance of a balaclavaed serial killer. Was this fear-driven</p>

			<p>morbidity aligned with his mother's fatal condition? We never found out.</p> <p>Sean's inability to take action, even when the force of moral right is on his side diminishes our interest in him.</p> <p>'The Clock', a non-denominational serial killer, was a memorable, and genuinely menacing creation. Comic interplay, alternating between revelatory insult and knee-jerk geniality, showed promise, but plot points, as they emerged tended to be agonisingly interspersed with repetitive carping.</p>
2.2	Direction	Competent	<p>As noted, the dramaturgical aspects of this production were flawed, but where this production suffered a real deficit was in the absence of pacing and modulation, which resulted in a paralysing lack of comic momentum. Whilst I felt that the audience was definitely on-side, the comic hysteria, which, which, on the strength of the dialogue, we perhaps all felt was latently present, did not emerge. Perhaps this was because the dialogue was trapped within a too-naturalistic performance framework, or because we were too scared of making a noise and missing some word upon which the plot might be hanging.</p> <p>The tendency of the actors to play line with maximum combative effect proved tiring.</p>
2.3	Standard of Performers – where performers are not trained, please reflect this in you comments	Good	<p>The standard of performance was good, and each moment was played with application and conviction, by Richard Orr as Sean, and by Michael Condron as Ciaran.</p> <p>Like with most two-handers, (the third character, played by Gareth Morrison, appears only at the end, and does not speak), the play required heroic assurance and stamina which was evident.</p> <p>More advice to warn of repetition, and lack of progression, and to encourage them to occasionally let rip, would have produced a show, by which they would, I'm sure, have felt more rewarded.</p>
2.4	Use of Music	Competent	<p>The soundtrack to the video sequences was atmospheric and effective. Inside the scenes the music was used timidly A loud sound cue at the end of act one effectively inhibited any applause. I felt I would have liked to send the cast off for a cup</p>

			of tea in the knowledge that their hard work had been appreciated.
2.5	Use of Movement/ Choreography	Poor	Sadly lacking. I felt that the physical exaggeration of agony, anger, remorse and fear would have served this production well. The fight scene was also disappointing.
2.6	Design – including set, costume and lighting design	Good	<p>The design, by Becky Minto was simple, but clever, and neatly incorporated the projection processes.</p> <p>The set represented a sizable step away from the realistic, an asset that I would have preferred to have been also incorporated into the actor's performance style. Surely this would have been a legitimate policy in a play where the 'McGuffin' is a mythical beast in a cardboard box. The lighting, by Dave Shea, was commendably simple, though the stage area near the back wall was not very conducive to frontlight, no alternative having been explored. In an attempt to avoid starkness upstage, lighting levels had been dropped, in my opinion, too far. In act two, the tool used to portray darkness was dimness. This resulted in problems of perceptibility. Costumes were simple and appropriate.</p> <p>The projections by Fifty-Nine Ltd, were clever and at times, mysteriously beautiful.</p> <p>As a whole, the mechanism for stage pictures could conjure up quite an impressive degree of menace.</p>
2.7	Technical Standards – was the production professionally presented from a technical point of view	Good	The set had survived over two weeks on the road, and showed no signs of deterioration of finish or detailed operation. Sound, lights and video, including some live camerawork, were well cued.
2.8	Audience Response – appropriateness of the production for the audience, estimate the size and reaction	Good	I should say that the auditorium was about forty per cent full. The spirit of the audience seemed to be informed curiosity, with the expectation of a bit of a laugh. They seemed to be sufficiently amused by it, but one moment of macabre hilarity with the no longer tied-up serial killer, though unsustainable, indicated the huge comic potential of the piece.

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	7:84 had a board in the foyer with pictures of past productions. Otherwise there was nothing, particularly outside and in the box office, to say that 7:84 was performing there that night. I couldn't find out where the playscripts were on sale until the interval. I had expected to be offered one as I entered the auditorium.
3.3	Publicity/ pre-publicity	The website has improved, and details the whole tour.
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	Logo printed on programme, and on the available playtext.
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