



Scottish Arts Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION – DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: 7:84 Theatre Company / The Lemon Tree

Title of Event: “Borderland”

Type of Event: Performance

Date of Visit: 29th September 2005

Overall Rating : GOOD

Overall this was a brave attempt to make politics exciting, mysterious and above all palatable to the general public. It was well executed with strong performances and a well produced film/video interaction that gave the production added depth and mystery. However, I do not feel the company were able to control the respective mystery and fantasy elements of the story line in a way that enabled the story to feel fully “rounded out” and complete. The script - while strong on its political ground - fell short in terms of drama and magic. It’s conclusions remained confused and unfocused at its end, with my own personal opinion unsure as to what the meaning of the work had been.

As a touring production it was well carried off, and I’m pleased that the company are still tackling complex story lines. If they can get the balance right this could be one of their most memorable shows for some time.

Name: Stephen Slater

Date: 05 / 10 / 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:

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, taking account of the following:

1.	Criteria	Rating	Comment and key reasons for rating
1.1	Vision and imagination	Good	7:84's "Borderland" concerns itself with the current political situation in Northern Ireland by focusing on two catholic brothers existing on the fringes of the flux emanating through the political sub culture. In an attempt to liven up this debate, they add a number of sub plots to this mix, two of the most prominent involving a serial killer and a fantastical creature from mythology. The mix is not always successful and length and pace are issues that rise and fall throughout the piece. However, overall this is an engaging and ambitious work, which tries to be both politically potent and dramatically fanciful and imaginative.
1.2	Clarity of Communication	Good	The company obviously feel safer on the political high ground – however, the piece gets rather bogged down in it's over long discussions between the main characters and the politics of Northern Ireland. The fantastical elements seem a little lost by comparison. For me the piece felt torn between these two elements and I never felt they were fully reconciled.

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 script was adequate for the production, playing off the two brothers as a low rent irish "Odd Couple" their characters being fairly predictable passive / aggressive set up which held few surprises. The political context was, for me a little laboured, and failed to ignite a particular interest either way. Of more interest was the other sub plots – but these seemed to get lost in the mix – the appearance of the mythical creature seeming to be of very little interest to the two brothers!
2.2	Direction	Competent	I found the direction to be satisfactory and straight forward, the two characters and their development nicely balanced out over the two halves of the show. However, there was a kind of symmetry to the work which was a little predictable, the first half virtually mirroring - in terms of action and pacing - the developments in the second. As mentioned, pacing was an issue for me, with long stretches of dialog where the play failed to advance and develop in any way. The central issue / debate between political acts of violence and that of cold blooded murder were left unresolved – with the fantastical elements (and catalyst for the events that followed) all but failing to find a footing in the second half.

2.3	Standard of Performers – where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments	Good	Both Michael Condron (Ciaran) and Richard Orr (Sean) were strong in their portrayal of the two brothers and their close relationship, although I found neither particularly likable in terms of the story. This probably had more to do with the script and its inability to come to any firm conclusions involving the plot lines, than with the performances themselves.
2.4	Use of Music ¹	Competent	For the most part the atmosphere for the piece was created by the music – this being the film music used in the re-make of Tarkovsky's "Solaris". It is a very beautiful and haunting piece of music and worked well with the action on stage. This atmosphere was also carried through to the video footage and what I took for an original sound score that accompanied these images. All the music was recorded.
2.5	Use of Movement/Choreography	Competent	Movement was confined to the narrow space created by the set for the majority of the piece. There were some fight scenes toward the end of the piece, which were carried off reasonably well.
2.6	Design ² – including set, costume and lighting design	Good	The set, which doubled for a house in Derry and a cottage in Donegal worked very well. I particularly liked how they changed the barbed wire fences of the first half into trees (with spent cartridges for leaves) in the second. Lighting was simple and effective – the real highlight being the use of video to string certain sections of the play together and which gave the work a greater depth and richness. The set was obviously a good design for touring.
2.7	Technical Standards – was the production professionally presented from a technical point of view	Good	Technically the play went very smoothly, effectively a two hander (with the unspoken presence of Gareth Morrison as the Murderer) and therefore was relatively free of complex technical difficulties. When these were required, the company handled them very well.
2.8	Audience Response – appropriateness of the production for the audience, estimate the size and reaction	Good	Audience response to the piece was very favourable with a nicely mixed age range and what looked to be a visiting college party. This group gave the loudest and most appreciative response at the end of the evening. I thought that there was about 150 people in the auditorium.

¹ 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 parts, and what effect this has on the quality of the production.

² 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	The theatre space upstairs at the Lemon Tree worked well for this production – wide enough to encompass the set of Fences / tress and provide atmosphere for the production. Sight lines were good for the entire stage.
3.2	Information/ interpretive material at venue ³	There was a good amount of company material on display at the venue – a leaflet giving company information plus the printed script in book form (@£2.50). There was additional company merchandise on sale at the interval and after the show.
3.3	Publicity/ pre-publicity ⁴	Publicity was good for the show – the company producing a good postcard with detailed of the tour dates on the back. The image used on this material and on the larger posters was a strong one which caught the eye in several locations.
3.4	Ease of booking and payment	Booking was done over the phone and went very smoothly. I promptly got my ticket within 48 hours.
3.5	External signage and signposting	External signage for the venue was good, with signage on both sides of the building.
3.6	Internal directional signage	Signage was adequate for the venue, although the building suffers from a “cluttered” feeling of small corridors and landings, which act as the foyer to the main space. Although not essential the overriding feeling was that the venue looked a bit tired and in need of re-decoration and it is obviously heavily used by the music industry and show all the signs of Gig “ware & tear”.
3.7	Access and provision for disabled people	Access was satisfactory. As mentioned above space seems to be an issue in the public spaces. However, there is a lift system for wheelchairs and access to the theatre space was good.
3.8	Timing of the event – was the length appropriate? Did the start and finish time seem to be appropriate for the audience?	Timing was good for this event as it’s length at 2 hours and 20 minutes would require the show to start and end at a reasonable time. The person programming the show had obviously taken the time to look into this. My only grip would be that having driven up from Glasgow I found that the building did not seem to be open to the public until 7.00pm and that there was no café for me to eat in before the show.
3.9	Customer service - quality and efficiency of staff (e.g., box office, front of house and bar/catering)	Staff service was very good. I asked several questions concerning aspects of the show – all of which were answered with politeness and speed.

³ These include programmes, displays etc., including the range, quality and clarity.

⁴ Publicity/pre-publicity (leaflets, posters, etc), including the range, content, and when and where available. Be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Also view and comment on the company’s website where one is advertised, commenting on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information

3.10	Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council funding ⁵	Scottish Arts Councils logo was present on all publicity for the show and the publicity for the building.
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⁵ 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.