

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL
SPECIALIST ADVISER ARTISTIC EVALUATION - DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: Arches Theatre Company / The Arches

Title of Event: Beowulf

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

Date of Visit: Tuesday 17th February 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.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: Seamus Heaney's powerful contemporary translation of the ancient epic poem Beowulf is partially brought to life by this promenade production which imaginatively uses the myriad of spaces at The Arches to create a sense of journey and to reflect the epic and forboding nature of the poem. However this production strives to do too much in a theatrical and visual sense which detracts somewhat from the strength of the words. Most notably this comes in the form of physically portraying the monster Grendal and its mother through a combination of performers rather than allowing the audience's own imagination to conjure up the creature.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	/	
Good		
Excellent		

1.2 Clarity of Communication.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: All 27 performers could be heard clearly. At times they deliberately created confused urgency by surrounding the audience from all sides, voices passing over our heads. However, there was at times too much going to allow all the words to sink in.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	/	
Good		
Excellent		

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).

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The text was taken from parts of Seamus Heaney's brilliant translation of Beowulf. This production was an adaptation of the first half of the full poem.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	/	

1.4 Direction

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The production cleverly used many of the labyrinthine spaces within The Arches, creating a visually and sonically rich environment which became, at times, overloaded with not enough time to allow meaning to develop. In this case, less would have been more. The many performers were, however, well directed and orchestrated in what must have been a mammoth task of co-ordination.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	/	
Good		
Excellent		

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

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: This production comprised 25 acting students and two professional actors. The students were clear, confident and committed whilst Finlay McLean portrayed King Hrothgar as suitably, in turns, fearful and beaten, then grateful. Tam Dean Burn, as Beowulf, was mesmerising with a sense of bitter steeliness, authority, conviction and self-belief. When he spoke the level of intensity of the performance increased noticeably.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	/	
Excellent		

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>		Comments and key reasons for rating: Pre-recorded atmospheric music /sound of Mark Carr came in the myriad form of ringing telephones, electronic noise, cello and percussion to name but a few. There was also some live drumming. This created a rich, menacing and urgent soundtrack to the production.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	/	
Excellent		

1.7 Use of Movement or Choreography

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: There was little movement-based performance, however the production did use some brief tableaux to reasonable effect. But the creation of Grendal by covered performers standing on each other's shoulders to give the physical impression of size only detracted from the translation. The portrayal of Grendal's mother by the chorus of acting and gesticulating students was also a weakness.
Very Poor		
Poor	/	
Competent		
Good		
Excellent		

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.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The design element for this promenade was truly ambitious and, for the most part, this was realised. The costumes were imaginative revealing a flair for design ranging from military and bureaucratic to gothic. The props were well produced, including a notable geometric red throne and menacing headwear. The sets ranged from clever moveable filing cabinets to claustrophobic forests with the only criticism being the penultimate set. This comprised of wooden flats with holes through which the chorus stuck their painted faces which, rather than being frightening, created an amateurish image. The lighting was excellent.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	/	
Excellent		

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

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The production cleverly used the labyrinthine spaces of The Arches to give the impression of tunnels and chambers. The lighting was used to good effect creating a rich and menacing atmosphere with simple colour back-lighting and dry-ice in the archways being particularly effective. There were many interesting lighting touches.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	/	
Excellent		

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>		Comments and key reasons for rating: The director's notes state that Beowulf's "brutal imagery, wonderful lyricism combined with a hard and modern expression - would be a perfect vehicle for theatrical interpretation". This is true, but in this production there is too much distance between the strength of the text / Tam Dean Burn's performance and that of the ultimately flimsy portrayal of the monsters and the overly busy nature of the production which at times was filled to bursting with activity. Less would have been more. Having said this, the production was well-performed and designed and revealed an adventurous spirit to develop the use of the venue.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	/	
Good		
Excellent		

1.11 Was the performance appropriate for the audience?

The audience was very mixed in terms of age - ranging from six to sixty years, possibly due to press coverage linking Beowulf with The Lord of the Rings. Some children appeared frightened but fascinated.

1.12 Estimated size of audience and reaction to the production.

Approximately 80 - 100 audience members. Reaction felt positive if a little muted.

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?

Due to the promenade nature of the event, the venue was very suitable.

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

- range, quantity and clarity - press preview/review display showing press coverage from The List, Sunday Herald, Metro and Herald etc. This was eagerly read by the audience before the performance and provided an interesting context. The free programme - photocopied four-pages - gave basic details of cast and production team, biogs and the Director's Notes which provided a brief outline of the story.

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.
Publicity included in Arches brochure. Preview article on actor Tam Dean Burn in The Herald. Press-display at the venue showed coverage in Metro, Sunday Herald, The List, The Herald etc. Web-site: easy to use, reasonably imaginatively designed but information same as brochure - no new insights.

2.4 Accessibility of the venue

- ease of payment - by phone - easy.
- location - centre of Glasgow, very accessible.

- external signposting - good.
- internal directional signing - no clear signing in the foyer but clear pre-show announcement and friendly staff to direct people.
- access and provision for disabled people - level access to all performance spaces utilised in the production.
- timing of event - 7.30pm.

2.5 Customer service

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

Logo included on brochure, website and programme.

Name: Mark Waddell.

Date: 18.02.04.

Advisor * Scottish Arts Council Officer

(Please tick above as appropriate)