

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Organisation/Venue: Theatre Workshop

Title of Event: Consider, Rather, the River

Type of Event: Performance –Community Play

Date of Visit: June 2003

1. Artistic Assessment

- 1.1 Please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event - its Vision and Imagination; Ability to Communicate; and Quality of Production.

This was an imaginative production using techniques of site-specific promenade performance in a location with lots of charm, drama and opportunities for thematic allusions. In general the piece communicated well, although there were some problems of audibility, and the script was rather complex, and at times slightly opaque. The production demonstrated high ambition in terms of its production values. These were not always successfully achieved, but on the whole the achievement was impressive.

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

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

This was a purpose-written script by Robert Rae. It combined elements of local history (contemporary and early nineteenth) with an eclectic range of myths and folk lore from Asia and Europe.

The writer used a device of a discovered icon of a river god (The Hapi) to link the various scenes and this was useful given the sometimes seemingly unrelated nature of the scenes.

The “gateway” into the piece was provided by scenes involving contemporary local children and a treasure hunter using a metal detector. This worked well, but the comment on contemporary housing policy and social relations in the area did not ring true in the mouths of these young people. There seemed to be an unresolved tension in the writing, which wished to evoke and celebrate the

mythology and spiritualism of the river as symbol and as place, while using rationalist arguments to debunk religiosity. These rational arguments seemed arid in the face of the evocative production which really did create a sense of mystery and magic.

The script borrowed from Herman Hesse's celebrated story of Sidharta's spiritual journey, transposing it in the rationalist/capitalist milieu of late 18th/early 19th century Edinburgh. Thus we saw the transition of the rationalist young gentleman (Sid) through immersion in sensuality, through the renouncement of worldly goods, to enlightenment. The climax of the story became rather confused culminating in a ghostly traverse of the River by Sid's beloved, or rejected lover.

Some scenes –such as “Mr and Mrs Snip Snip” were difficult to make sense of in the context and served to break up, rather than unify the production. It would have been better to have had a series of scenes unrelated in plot terms but *thematically* linked, *or* a through-line of narrative that made a coherent whole. As it was there was a mixture of the two approaches and this did lead to some confusion.

Space does not permit an exploration here of all the themes and allusions contained in the script and this perhaps highlights a weakness- too much content and too much text for such a situation and such a form.

That said there was much of interest in the writing, and if it did on occasion fall into polemic, it was nevertheless engaging and entertaining.

- Direction

The Director (Morven Gregor) set herself a gargantuan task with this production. The cast size, the complexity of the settings and multiplicity of the scenes, and themes all contributed to an epic piece of work. Logistically this was a major undertaking, and on the whole the direction succeeded in meeting the challenges. The piece moved along at a satisfactory pace, although occasionally help up by rather too long speeches (e.g. the Friends of the People scene).

Key successes were the Flour children and Broonies- a sort of cross between Barrie's lost boys, and the Gorbals die-Hards. Their silent-movie antics with the Stockbridge version of the Keystone Cops was great fun. The hallucinogenic scenes celebrating the sensual life were also full of impact and life. The more wordy scenes were less successful and the ones relying primarily on visual impact definitely had greater impact.

There was an intriguing sense that the production allowed the audience an opportunity to view what might be familiar locations in a new light. This was most striking in the scene using the neo-classical St Bernard's Well as a Romano-

British Temple, with the striking figure of a woman in purple framed between the Doric columns. Getting a glimpse into the well itself was also a treat.

The climax of the piece was slightly dissipated by problems with the sound amplification and what seemed an unplanned delay. However, there were many striking images and tableau, not least the figure in white walking across the weir, framed by the dark foliage and reflective water.

I think that the direction managed to be inventive, delivered surprises and provided a through thread that held the piece together.

- Standard of performers

The performances were generally of a high standard, with audibility under the outdoor (windy) conditions pretty good overall. There was certainly an admirable level of commitment with performers having to undergo physically demanding situations, with considerable discomfort in many cases.

The performers were well rehearsed and disciplined and showed a real zest for the piece.

- Design

The design was very ambitious and there were many high points. I thought that the prop-making of objects placed in the landscape were excellent, and the final image of the paper boats lit by their own candles, floating down the river, was very striking.

There had clearly been a great deal of work done on costume and the attention to detail and quality of the costume was of a high order.

The sound and lighting design, and well as being logistically difficult, complemented the production well.

- Technical Standards

A very challenging piece and well executed despite the obvious obstacles. Problems with amplified sound at one or two key points did, unfortunately lessen the impact of the scenes affected.

- Overall Production

Overall a very ambitious production which succeeded on most fronts. I think that the content could have been pared back a bit without losing the overall impact of the piece. I think that the location and scale of the project would be bound to overwhelm any attempt at detailed writing and that the script and plot were strongest when kept simple and emblematic.

There was a real sense of place and the work responding to, and taking advantage of the location. There were some striking visual moments and I think that many of these had their own significance which would have been sustained even with less text to support them.

I would have thought that participating in this would have been invigorating and exciting for those taking part, of which there were around 100.

- Appropriateness of production for the audience

There was a mixed group of people in terms of age and I think there was something for everyone in the piece.

- Approximate size of audience and reaction to the programme of work

I think there were around 100 which was the right number to allow access and safety.

2. Management of Event

- 2.1 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.

Good

2.2 Suitability of the venue for the event:

Although outdoor, this was a man-made environment linked to the river and woods, which lent itself well to this production.

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

- range, quantity and clarity.

Attractive programme well produced. Acknowledgement of Funders, though on the inside on not on the outside of the programme which doubled as a poster.

2.4 Publicity/Pre Publicity for the Event (leaflets, posters, etc):

- range, content and when and where available.

I was aware of editorial coverage in the press, but not much else as I was not in the local area in advance.

2.5 Accessibility of the venue:

- ease of payment Good
- location Good
- direction Fair
- access for disabled people Good, considering it was a site specific event- mostly on the level although some audience members needed, and got, extra assistance. Would have been a difficult piece for people with hearing difficulties. •

timing of event.

Good- quite a long evening at nearly 2.5hours, but full of incident.

2.6 **Customer service:**

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

Good- attentive and well-briefed marshals etc.

3. **Background to your visit**

3.1 Have you seen the work of this artist/company before?

YES

3.2 Is this your first visit to this venue?

NO

David Taylor
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