

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL
SPECIALIST ADVISER ARTISTIC EVALUATION - DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh

Title of Event: Dark Earth

Type of Event: Performance

Date of Visit: 23 August 2003

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named above. 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 (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: <i>Dark Earth</i> uses the tensions produced within well-realised family and romantic relationships to approach a series of issues both far-reaching and ambitious. The directions in which the play leads its audience are numerous and significant, addressing and (vitaly) adding to discourses of belonging, physical/social landscapes, isolation etc. At times the movement from the intimate, personal scale to suggestions of social, macro importance feels strained or partly unformed. However, the largely subtle approach of the play successfully leaves these issues to become fully engaged with in the responses and interpretations formed by the audience. The production works best when it is non-didactic – approaching issues through relationships and narratives, rather than dictating them thematically.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	X	
Excellent		

1.2 Clarity of Communication.

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: The production first draws the audience into a narrative occupied by strong, distinctive characters and powerful, identifiable relationships. This enables the increasingly complex and dangerous conflicts and passions that run under the surface of the narrative to be readily accessible. The degree of engagement with the audience, on multiple levels of communication, is impressive.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	X	
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: A new play by David Harrower, the script for <i>Dark Earth</i> is excellent. The relationships between the characters are finely drawn, exploring familial and romantic stresses that might seem familiar with subtlety and freshness. The dialogue is extremely sharp, vibrant and darkly comic. Humour is used very effectively to ground, undercut and add to the pathos and social significance of the drama. The movement from the intimate scale to more explicit suggestions of wider implications is less surely handled. At the end of the play, in particular, the father's sudden outburst of paranoia and the swiftly accelerated urban/rural duality do not quite carry the viewer along. Here the strength of characterisation, and the importance of the intimate, familial scale, is lost in a sudden rush to exclamations and stereotypes. This said, the overall ambition, and ability to approach and realise this ambition in a largely delicate and powerful manner, is excellent.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	X	

1.4 Direction

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		Comments and key reasons for rating: On the whole, the pacing of the play and the sharp exchanges within the relationships is effectively realised. There is also an excellent narrative of unspoken exchanges and physical relationships between actors that underpins the dialogue. At the same time, however, the production has a largely static appearance within the space it occupies, the atmosphere it constructs just too weightily portentous, the sense of loss and gloom (which the script neatly accompanies with humour) just too unleavened. Producing good performances from the actors and realising the central relationships and the script's vibrancy very effectively, the production still manages to appear at times stolid and slightly awkward within itself.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	X	
Excellent		

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

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	X	
Excellent		

All the performances are of a very high standard, realising the sharp dialogue with a snappy clarity. Particular comment on Frances Grey and John MacKay, who together produce a subtle, complex presentation of what if less fully formed might have come across as a slightly one dimensional relationship. Anne Lacey as Ida, additionally, embodied and communicated a power sense of conservative fear and isolation produced by loneliness and the threat of change.

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 (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	X	
Good		
Excellent		

Dark Earth employs a recorded score, produced for the production, which introduces the audience to the performance and marks time during the brief scene changes. Music in the production is subtly used as an atmospheric device, without intruding or becoming merely incidental.

1.7 Use of Movement or Choreography

Rating for this section (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating:
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent		

No particular comment.

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 (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: Neatly conceptualised, with walls folding in on themselves to form different spaces and sliding panels marking insides and outsides with clarity. The overall effect, however, is somewhat heavy and results in a static energy within the performance space. The scale and execution of the wall, additionally, is dominating at the same time as not really conveying a sense of being rooted in the landscape, of weight or permanence. It overawes, rather than adds to, the production. Together, the lighting and set constructed a sense of gloomy foreboding, always demarking a narrow, limited world. While certainly appropriate, this lacked the subtlety of the script and did not entirely communicate a sense of landscape or place.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent	X	
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 (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: Very good, professionally and smoothly presented.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good	X	
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 (Please tick)		Comments and key reasons for rating: Overall the production is an excellent example of the work of the Traverse Theatre, particularly in terms of fulfilling its manifesto of being a new writing theatre. <i>Dark Earth</i> fulfils this in presenting new and challenging drama and, additionally, fulfils wider ambitions in terms of contributing to important national (and international) discourses. The production is also successful in terms of its introduction of new acting talent and the utilisation and development within the Traverse of a pool of performers and artists.
Very Poor		
Poor		
Competent		
Good		
Excellent	X	

1.11 Was the performance appropriate for the audience?

Yes, *Dark Earth* was performed in front of a festival audience of mixed ages and (as far as it was possible to tell) backgrounds.

1.12 Estimated size of audience and reaction to the production.

Performed to a full house in the Traverse Two auditorium, the production went down very well, particularly in terms of its comedic aspects. (This is not to say that other elements went down less well, merely that without detailed audience research it is impossible to guess how the audience responded to and developed the social themes presented in the production.)

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?

Yes. The busyness and sense of anticipation created in the Traverse during the festival is excellent.

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

- range, quantity and clarity.

In the context of the Traverse's ambitions as a new writing theatre, the presentation of the full play-text in an affordable programme effectively profiles the script; going at least part way to ensuring its lifespan beyond the production and facilitating its consideration within a wider theatrical context. The programme, however, could be seen to lack an element of contextualisation that audiences might expect. This is not a major deficit, although short textual introductions (rather than full notes) would certainly be interesting.

Traverse productions are well represented by posters and displayed reviews within the venue.

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.

Dark Earth was well represented within the Traverse's festival brochure and received good, wide press coverage.

The Traverse website is on a large and detailed scale, providing a good range of information (and links to information in the media) and is generally easy to navigate.

2.4 Accessibility of the venue

- ease of payment – fine, no problems
- location – excellent
- external signposting – fine, no problems
- internal directional signing – fine, no problems
- access and provision for disabled people – appeared fine, although I am not the best person to ask about this...
- timing of event – fine, no problems

2.5 Customer service

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

Busy, but that is what one wants during the festival.

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.

Fine, present in print and web material.

Name: Matthew Reason

Date: 26 August 2003

Advisor

X

Scottish Arts Council Officer

(Please tick above as appropriate)