

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL

Assessment Report

Organisation/venue: Traverse Theatre Company at the Traverse
Title of event: The People Next Door by Henry Adams
Type of event: performance – Fringe preview
Date of visit: 12/07/2003

1. Artistic assessment

Please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event - its vision and imagination; ability to communicate; and quality of production

The aim of this piece was unclear, which meant that its ability to communicate with the audience was seriously impaired. (see script)

1.1 Script

This felt unfinished and its form was confused. It seemed that Henry Adams started to write one play, took the script through several other possibilities and ended up with another.

It needed some stringent dramaturgical work to clarify the structural and stylistic muddle and to bring out its strength – which was the playwright's wry observational humour. It would also have benefited greatly from cuts – it didn't need to run at this length.

The end of the piece, which got slightly farcical, worked well but it went on too long which lessened its impact. This would have made a stronger ending than the cosy domestic scene thereafter – which wasn't necessary and added nothing to the piece.

The characters were stereotypical, which actually worked very well in this context and the interplay between them was mostly well written. The exception was Marco – who seemed to have been written for another play, in that it had more depth and there seemed to be a character development throughout the play. Obviously there is no "right or wrong" way for a playwright to create – but to have these two different types of character creation in one play is another example of the script's muddled approach.

This was not an entirely realistic play but the characters and their actions need to make sense within the contexts set by the playwright and there were some glaring illogicalities which hindered the audience's staying with the production as the story unfolded. For example, why did Marco shoot the policeman? As part of the key scene it jarred as there was no reason for this. In the first half Nigel had problems pronouncing words of more than two syllables – during the second he became increasingly more articulate for no apparent reason.

The publicity led one to believe that one would get a (humorous) take on contemporary issues – but this didn't happen. The playwright is not responsible for publicity, but I

wonder if he had originally meant to touch on (any?) of the themes that were supposed to make the play particularly relevant to now?

1.2 Direction

By Roxana Silbert. This was of acceptable standard considering the script she had to work with. She could have introduced greater variation of mood and tension, to alter the meandering pace of the whole night, but this is also related to the dramaturgical work that the script would benefit from. The play dragged on the night I saw it (it overran by almost 30 minutes) – but I am sure that she will tighten up the pace.

Standard of Performers

All the performers were of a reasonable overall standard and worked well together. Any problems Fraser Ayres (Nigel) had were due largely to unbelievable elements within the script and his portrayal was convincing within those limitations. Jimmy Akingbola (Marco) was miscast – he looks too old to play such a young character. This is not the actor's fault and to his credit he tried hard.

Design

By Miriam Buether (presumably designed with an eye to tour this on after the Fringe.) Initially it seemed over literal, but actually functioned well for this play.

Lighting design by Neil Austen. This was of reasonable standard apart from the final scene where the characters were meant to stay in their own very tightly focussed lights which they all failed to do. These lights were focussed so tightly the actors can't be blamed for moving their heads in and out – as this scene is in some ways the "finale" of the piece and as it broke the lighting conventions set previously needs to be executed to a very high standard in order to work.

Technical Standards

A few obvious mistakes with sound queues. One could hope for better with this company, even although it was billed as a Fringe preview.

Overall Production

It was an entertaining night out but didn't offer a great deal else. This is, of course, a legitimate aim for a piece of theatre, but one hopes for some emotional and/or intellectual engagement as well. I would assume, given that it was a Traverse production, that the company would aim for this.

Appropriateness of production for the audience

Seemed appropriate,

Approximate size of audience and reaction to the programme of work

c. 60% full in Traverse 1. The audience obviously found it amusing and gave the actors an appreciative response.

