



International Playwriting Festival 2015

Taking place over two days, the Festival showcases selected plays from an international competition that attract entries from all over the world along with the pick of the BRIT School's Strawberry Picking season and contributions from international partners.

This year, the programme also featured an interview with dramatist Peter Moffat speaking to playwright and critic Jeremy Kingston. Most of the plays were presented in edited extracts to provide a taster of their quality.

Jump

This BRIT School selection, which opened the first day of the Festival, was written, directed and performed by students of this free school which provides a specialist curriculum in performing arts and technology as part of a general education.

Inspired by the work of CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably), a charity dedicated to preventing male suicide, the UK's biggest single killer of men aged 20 to 45, and presents three men of different ages who all appear on a rooftop planning to jump off it.

Awkward at the presence of the others and trapped because the door down can't be opened from outside, they share their stories which are played out flashback: job loss, marital breakdown and being gay. It is a mature piece of writing from teenager Laren Ziebart and, though Myles Kembi's direction couldn't overcome some uneven acting, there was an imaginative use of physical theatre.

Deeds not Words

This IPF selection by Tony Zeane from Sydney, Australia, partly set in an inner city school, explores teenage experience and especially that of young Moslem Mohammed who lives with his mother while his father spends more time elsewhere with his second wife. Former actor, now teacher, Zeane clearly knows the trials of the classroom.

In this staged reading, directed by Ted Craig, Christopher Simon played the teacher with a nice balance between frustration and humour while scenes of Mohammed with his mother and then his father's arrival suggest this may be an interesting exploration of living in two different cultures.

H7

The economic situation found the Festival's regular partners Teatro Ena from Cyprus and Extra Candoni from Italy too strapped for cash to participate but fortunately Spain was able to provide a guest production in the play by Juan Echenique Périsco.

It's a new take on the emigrant situation set in a bus station where two men who met when, full of hope, they first came to the country re-encounter each other ten years later when they are both leaving. Alin Balascan played a disillusioned realist and the writer himself a seeming fantasist who does seem to have made a success of things.

It is a bizarre, surreal encounter of attitudes and achievements which in Fumi Gomez's production was rhythmically underscored by the drumming of Spiro Maus.

HE to Hecuba

An IPF selection by Patrick Carmichael from Briarwood, USA presented a wealthy American couple, long married, so she is always finishing her husband's sentences (at least she says so, though we didn't hear much of it). They were entertaining an old friend George with whom, though he's newly married, the hostess seems to think she is having an affair.

The extracts presented included a mute granny keen on the gin. We discovered no more about her but George's new wife was an intriguing character. She turned out to be an old friend of the hostess with a new name and reclaiming a Jewish heritage after 20 years in a coma—which she took as licence to knock them off her age. Actress Anna Savva made you want to see more of her.

Despite Richard Shannon's lively direction, the scenes presented were too limited to be sure whether this is a clever comedy or madcap confusion.

Converted

Opening the second day of the Festival was this play by Helen Seymour (UK). Set in a society in which a sectarian Christianity has recriminalized homosexuality, it began with a Dr Temple about to administer aversion therapy treatment to a young woman who seems to have had an isolated lesbian experience.

The doctor's daughter Grace is sitting in as an observer of the procedure. She has a degree in psychology but finds herself questioning a practice based on religious teaching. Her father, however, sees his therapy as a compassionate act, the alternative being prison, and claims to have private voluntary patients who chose "conversion", not just those referred by the courts.

In a second scene, Grace, now an intern gaining work experience, is applying treatment for the first time, the subject a man whose lover of 12 years was shot by police who forced their way into their home. David Thackeray played the "patient" with a passionate conviction that suggested that this could be a powerful play, making one want to know how it proceeds.

Bluey

Set in a robotics laboratory, UK dramatist Carole Boyer's play seems less about the possibilities of robots than the responsibilities of those who make and control them and the way we wage war with drones and other remote resources.

Robot Bluey has been developed for the military to replace UN peacekeepers. It is supposed to be programmed only to respond when under attack but has opened fire on non-militants.

The boffins have to discover why and correct the fault but are handicapped because the original designer has been killed in a car crash and security procedures prevent them accessing his files. Should they risk the dangers of attempting modification or abort, abandoning years of research investment?

Directed by Mark Norfolk, the extracts performed set up the situation and presumably the play explores these issues further.

Changes

This is the second year running that writer Neal Masson (UK) has had a play selected. It is set on a rubbish tip littered with discarded domestic equipment. Does that represent the detritus of a disintegrating marriage? For this is a play that begins with a newly-married couple who've gone without a honeymoon and in a second scene presented shows that marriage in danger as the husband is driven by career and possessions while the wife is a social worker.

An ethical conflict develops between a husband who is prepared to cheat and exploit if it brings success on his terms and a wife who cares about people and social responsibilities. Orla Sanders and Martin Rosen made a well-contrasted couple under Mark Norfolk's direction.

Max and Wren

The final play, by Jerry Lacy (New York, USA), presents Max, a widower for 7 years who lives in an apartment on New York's East Side with a view of Central Park. His concerned daughter Sandy is concerned that he is becoming isolated and reclusive but perhaps that's about to end for he has taken a liking to a young woman who lives down the corridor who brings up his post which has piled up in the lobby. She is Wren.

Sandy is pleased that he is starting to socialise when she hears about Wren and the time they spend together, chatting or watching old Garbo movies, until she realises how young Wren is and that her father is leaving Wren his flat in his will. But is all as it seems?

Director Ninon Jerome filleted this play to present the whole outline of the story in 30 minutes. It seems a perceptive look at loneliness and aging with a twist to the plot and, as played by Morgan Deare, Anna Doolan and Sally Faulkner, I thought it the pick of what was on offer.

It is difficult to make any judgement on scripts only partially presented. I don't know whether, full length, these plays would prove successful in production. Presumably the Warehouse Phoenix team choosing them think so. What this Festival does provide is a sample of writing and these internationally sourced plays suggest a talent for invention and an ear for dialogue that make them worth exploring further.

In addition to these eight plays, those attending were also able to enjoy a conversation in which dramatist and drama critic Jeremy Kingston, formerly of *The Times*, interviewed celebrity playwright and screen writer Peter Moffat—whose first two plays were presented at the old Warehouse Theatre which thus launched his career. Though concentrating mainly on the television work for which Moffat is best known, this proved interesting and occasionally delightfully indiscreet.

Producers Ted Craig and George Savvides and their Phoenix team are to be congratulated on keeping the Festival alive and decidedly kicking despite difficult times. How long must they wait before they get their new theatre in Croydon?

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