

Halden Theatre presents Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Huis Clos'

Halden Theatre is a new theatre group based in Nottingham, and its aims are somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, it sets out to 'bring theatre to the people' by placing it back in everyday social environments such as bars, cafes and even outdoor public spaces. Yet it also promises not to 'dumb down' or to 'succumb to the low standards of many forms of modern entertainment mediums'. Lofty ambitions indeed.

If the opening performance of Sartre's famous existentialist offering *Huis Clos* was anything to go by, the Halden Theatre group has succeeded in both ambitions. Friday's performance at Lee Rosy's Tea Shop in Nottingham's Broad Street gave us both the intimacy of a troupe of travelling players, and yet also the quality of an established repertory company.

In a space not much bigger than many people's living rooms, they managed to arrange a convincing set, an auditorium for 20 people, and even a technical desk situated in the wings! Members of the cast sat amongst the audience until their entrance was required, creating an immediacy of atmosphere reminiscent of experimental or community theatre. But once the cast had made its entrance, there was nothing experimental about the performance. The acting and direction were as tight and controlled as Sartre's piece demands – all four characters were word perfect and together, impeccably timed. Undoubtedly talented individuals, it was also clear that they had been directed with precision and passion, so director Daniel Hallam should be congratulated too.

This play is so famous that it could have been daunting for the cast to deliver. Not so – Richard Bolton as the Valet presented us with exactly the right balance of mischief and indifference (to the other characters) that was required; whilst Lian Duan playing the working-class lesbian Inèz gave us a truly convincing portrayal of the honesty and understanding that sets this character apart from the valet's other two victims. Undeniably convincing.

Natalia Douglas, as the self-obsessed Estelle, gave a faultless performance. Estelle's character is one who *believes* that her own coquettishness and arched manner present her to the others as an innocent and mistreated waif, yet Natalia Douglas manages to unmask the character as being perhaps the most heinous of the three with such delicious spite that we, the audience, are shocked. Perfect.

Guy Evans – unbelievably learning the part in only five days, after a previous actor had to step down – was the personification of the hapless and miserable Garcin. His physical appearance was exactly that of the lothario that Garcin believes himself to be, but with consummate ease, Evans managed to show us what Sartre wanted us to see – an emotionally crippled coward, wracked with deceit and weakness. When it came time to deliver one of the most famous lines in history, it must have been tempting to 'bottle it' or at the least to turn it into a cliché of bathos. But Guy Evans handled it with the gravity and pathos that the line deserves. Even though we might have already known what was coming, when he eventually stared into oblivion and uttered the words: "Hell is other people", we were almost surprised. Well done.

Thinking of famous lines, there'll be another one coming up soon in one of Halden Theatre's future productions. I can't wait to see how Daniel Hallam deals with Lady Bracknell's "A *handbag*?" when they do Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Halden Theatre has only two permanent members of the company – director Daniel Hallam and producer Barry Paul Horrell. Their aim is to engage the community in theatre and they want to include as many people as possible, both in terms of participation in the productions, and with the audiences they attract. Judging by their début with *Huis Clos*, they are already bound to succeed.

Huis Clos will get other showings this month: At the Jam Café on 21st & 22nd July; Fade on 29th July; and then back at Lee Rosy's on 31st July. Strongly recommended.

www.haldentheatre.co.uk