



Twentysomething: A Reading List: **A company of twentysomethings**

Love is the thread that has run strongly through my personal Ignite journey this year. Brotherly love in *Duplicity*; maternal love in *The Tempest*; mismatched love in *Kusse*; and the varieties of love in *On Love*.

Twentysomething: A Reading List is, according to its own PR, about the unexpected hollowness of life for two recent graduates who find themselves in a brave new world with no map, no compass, and a diminishing desire to meet their earlier ambitions. They only seem to experience emotions at second hand, mediated by the words of Alan Bennett, Woody Allen, Morrissey and others.

Do not be deceived: *Twentysomething* is something bigger. Without obeying the rules of chronology, this is in truth the story of the rise and fall of a loving relationship, lovingly portrayed.

There is a quote attributed to Groucho Marx: "Sincerity is the key to success. Once you can fake that you've got it made." Ali Sondreal and Patrick McHugh do indeed do an extraordinary job (the hardest challenge in acting) of persuading us that they are sincere. They seem to have an instinctive grasp of their craft and a talent to engage the audience's sympathy, often through humour.

As ever, the atmosphere at The Rusty Bike is cheerful and, despite occasional glumness in the tale, this performance is ultimately uplifting.

ROGER JARMAN

Next performances: Thursday 5th June at 8pm, Friday 6th June at 6pm, at The Rusty Bike

ORLANDO: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY: **AIDAN STRICKLAND**

Based on Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*, this strangely avant-garde show presents a reinterpretation of the character, basking in all his/her gender-shifting pride and glory, with a cabaret song or two to match.

As this rather grotesque portrayal of Woolf's most profound character began, there was a distinct possibility that I might despise this performance. Equipped with two puppets, a bongo, a backing-track CD, eye make-up and a wig fit for a drag-queen, the potential for 50 minutes of an amateur attempt at a shoddy cabaret act was almost too much for me. However, I persisted with the idea that there must be something behind those fake eyelashes to have the cultural audacity to base a performance on a revered classic. This show is absolutely bizarre – and it absolutely pulls it off.

The script is sharply intelligent and frequently hilarious. Aiden Strickland breaks the fourth wall in all the right places, although sometimes the interaction with the audience seems unnecessary, as are many of his explicitly gender-confused gestures. However, this is an oddly captivating performance; the subtleties of expression and the consistently strong vocalisation mean that I simply can't take my eyes off him.

I take my hat off to Strickland; he was able to U-turn my opinion to the extent that I went from considering walking out the door to ultimately wanting more.

PHOEBE GRAHAM (*Exeter Northcott Young Critic*)

Life on One Wheel | Small Talk

Life on the One Wheel is a gently charming piece of theatre from Small Talk, a newly formed company of graduating students from Falmouth University.

The early evening performance in Exeter's newly re-opened Library was an ideal try-out of new work made in the region and showcased within the Ignite Theatre Festival programme.

The three engaging young performers (who aren't named in the programme notes) take us on a journey that embraces the history of the Penny Farthing Bicycle, the geography of Canada and the entertaining use of a set of paper bags.

The story begins with a set of drawings being created on acetates and projected on an old-style overhead projector; after a while this becomes slightly distracting, as audience and performers wait to see the next image rather than becoming drawn into the narrative. The performers have both considerable energy and stage presence, and the show is strongest when the performers tell the story through imaginative physical theatre. The cycling sequence at the start is both skilful and amusing.

The relationship between the characters isn't always clear, and the links between the bicycle-based story and the party scenes are bemusing at times, but there are some strong and original ideas within the piece. With more time spent on developing and refining the strongest elements, this show certainly has potential.

Small Talk is a company well worth looking out for in the future.

RACHEL SUTTON

MOTHERLAND | SUZE GARDNER

Marie Stopes is inextricably linked to the birth, as it were, of contraception. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that she was also a proponent of eugenics. This new play by Suze Gardner offers a sinister take on the reasons behind Stopes's establishment of her birth control clinic, underscored by a reminder of what the Nazis were up to in Europe at the same time.

Motherland cleverly portrays the contradictions of feminist pioneer Stopes, who – always dismissive of the working-class women she sees in the clinic – lowers her own standards at the drop of a hat when in the company of her lover, Dirk Vanderhost.

The play is billed as a wartime black comedy, but the comedy element is somewhat lacking, with the humorous potential (bishops and condoms, for example) lost in a slightly sluggish script. This is not to deny the brilliance of Jan Hookway's cleaning lady, Mrs Hems – move over Julie Walters – who offers welcome light relief.

All the players gave commendable performances, although not everyone was word perfect. I liked the voice of reason that is Nurse Cooper, and the awkwardness between Stopes and her confused son, Harry, was well realised, but I didn't buy in to the passionate relationship with Vanderhost.

The concept of *Motherland* itself is fresh, but overall the production would benefit from an injection of pace and judicious editing. This would be well worth exploring, as the play itself has relevance to the current social climate.

SUE CADE

Next performance: Saturday 7th June at 3pm, Cygnet Theatre

Gym Party | Made In China

Chris, Jess and Ira want their names up in lights and they're prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in pursuit of their goals. What is a gym party? Either it's a concept invented by Made in China, or – and this is entirely believable – it's a weird transatlantic custom. If there's one near you – reject the invitation. Any excuse will do.

Chris, Jess and Ira are a crazed and energetic bunch – think mixture of clown, zombie, salesman and martyr with a strong dose of evangelical zeal. And all dressed in white shorts and singlets. And zany hair.

The show opens with a monologue from Jess, who sets out their stall. We're in a world of winners and losers, acclaim and humiliation. The trio are set against each other in a series of manic games, which get progressively nastier: trials by public vote, scoring based on IQ, looks, sexual attractiveness, wealth, trustworthiness... Glory moments to the high scorers, shame and punishment to the others. This is uncomfortable viewing.

But it's not just viewing; the audience is lured into the process. This is stand-up tragedy and your name and business may be required. The performers' mantra is that they're there for their public and you are there for them. Thumbs up or thumbs down, prizes or penalisation – it's your choice.

ANNA MARKS

Next performance: Thursday 5th June at 7pm, Exeter Phoenix



On Love | KiteHigh Theatre

On Love – an ambitious remit for the KiteHigh team of Charlie Haskins, Rhian Marston-Jones, Hayley Norris and Michael Woodman. Both individually and as an ensemble, the actors were impressive. Appearing natural and spontaneous is the hardest thing to act.

However, I found it was rather like watching a Michelin-starred kitchen having to work with a junk food menu. *On Love* is a sequence of (perhaps real) snippets of personal experiences, but this was a meal consisting of nibbles rather than satisfying dishes. The cast cleverly – and (too) rapidly – switched roles and personae and perspectives, but there was little coherence to the piece.

Perhaps my expectations were too high. So far, I have had a very exciting festival with three very different but tip-top productions. And – as I said – these actors were uniformly good and I hope they all have the opportunity to work with better material.

Love is the perennial subject matter of many (if not most) examples of human artistic expression. In drama, love must be more than a dry topic, forensically examined. Comparisons are invidious, but read my review of *Twentysomething* to see how a well-constructed drama gives actors something to really get their teeth into and an audience the opportunity to properly engage.

Still, in the spirit of Ignite – and recognising that I could be wrong – I would still urge you to give *On Love* a chance.

ROGER JARMAN

Next performance: Thursday 5th June at 1.50pm, Bike Shed Theatre

Gloriator: Spitz & Co

Gloriator is about a pretentious French actress, Gloria Delaneuf, who stages her own version of the film *Gladiator* in order to give the ‘poorly represented’ female characters a ‘voice’, aided by her accident-prone British tour manager, Josephine Cunningham.

Exploring the classic straight man-clown, master-servant relationship, this piece has the audience in fits of laughter from start to finish – there are even some wails, snorts and tears, which add to the hilarity and dynamic atmosphere. Audience participation is key: one young man, teased from the start, ends up on stage as Gloria’s love interest who Josephine then tries to steal. My sides are still aching from seeing Josephine ‘drop’ a cardboard prop Gloria is changing behind, revealing the actress in her underwear. At first she seems embarrassed, then fully embraces her ‘artistic creation’ and cavorts across the stage, asking the audience to touch her body, which “is good – yeah?!”

The performers use the space at the Bike Shed exceptionally well and the low-tech cardboard props are charming. One of the most engaging and impressive elements is the physical comedy: at one point, Josephine plays a horse, which she clearly revels in – I’m slightly envious of the free-spirited way in which she trots and gallops around the stage. But then an attempt to jump some cardboard scenery ends in disaster....

By the end, Gloria is excitedly enthusiastic about going on a ‘royal tour’, until Josephine explains the misunderstanding – it is, in fact, a ‘rural tour’... Brilliant. *Gloriator* is a must see.

JENNY WILCOX

Next performances: Thursday 5th June at 4.50pm, Saturday 7th June at 4.40pm, at Bike Shed Theatre

RAW: Emerging Arts Platform

Up on campus the Uni bunch are set to fly. There's a degree showcase and it's hot stuff – see if you can spot the stars of the future. Try the classic Commedia, Welsh's world of skag or a bunch of celebrities getting their comeuppance. Hours of entertainment – plenty of bang for your buck. A different selection of shows each day.

ANNA MARKS

Next performances: Thursday 5th June at 2pm & 7pm, Saturday 7th June at 2pm & 7pm, at Exeter Northcott

Egg: Carla Hayes

Life is glitter. Life is heartbreak. Life is kung fu. Autobiography: what do you leave in and what do you take out? Carla Hayes gives us a joyful glimpse into her world. *Egg* is about life’s potential, a journey of discovery and finding roots through family. From the palm of her hand, six personal stories are told.

This piece has a lightness to it, yet hints at the fragile complexities of one woman’s journey. It is both brave and big-hearted. We hear wise words from grandparents, memories of flying from the nest and falling in love. Carla developed the show during six months of rigorous physical training as a vehicle to access memory. Drawing inspiration from artists Bobby Baker and Marina Abramovic, she uses performance as a means of exploring and sharing her own life experience as art.

Selecting the stories she wanted to share was a huge challenge. Carla admits she counted 48 eggs in rehearsal and reveals, “The box isn’t full ’cos I’m not dead yet!” Initial feedback from her first scratch performance at the Bike Shed Theatre was, for this performer, “absolutely valuable”. The audience tonight praised Carla’s honesty but were left curious for more. Her original work-in-progress continues to evolve, with another performance in South Korea followed by a tour of Australia later this year.

EMILY KEENE

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 A slightly incoherent debut from a new company in which three performers attempt to make a radio show, but one of their number seems to have issues with his mother...
BELINDA DILLON
Next performances: Thursday 5th June at 5.30pm, Saturday 7th June at 5pm, at The Hour Glass

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