

Edinburgh Festival Fringe review: Morning ****



British playwright Simon Stephens has past form in dealing with violence between young people: his 2009 play *Punk Rock* depicted a shooting rampage in a Manchester school. But he takes things further in his new play, *Morning*, where the lives of a group of teenagers collide and intersect, revealing their overwhelming neediness and volatility.

Seventeen-year-old Stephanie is about to lose her best friend Cat, who's moving to college elsewhere, and her mother, who's dying of cancer. She finds her saintly boyfriend Stephen boring, and takes advantage of his gullability to carry out a shocking act – perhaps a cry for help, or simply for fun.

And it's not just in the brutal event that forms the play's centrepiece that Stephens focuses on casual violence, but also in the blunt, confrontational exchanges between characters throughout the piece.

It's a play to admire and certainly to think about, but perhaps not to enjoy. The highly effective staging by Lyric Hammersmith artistic director Sean Holmes keeps us well aware that everything is artifice, with the trappings that create theatrical magic exposed for us all to see, and a young God-like tech guy twiddling knobs to control lights and sound right in the centre of the stage.

The performances by the six-strong young cast are compelling, and fascinating to watch, not least in their unpolished ruggedness, entirely in keeping with the play's extreme themes. Scarlet Billham is powerfully convincing as Stephanie, nicely balancing insecurity with casual amorality, and Ted Reilly is memorable, and appropriately wide-eyed as her

boyfriend.

But ultimately it's unclear what Stephens is trying to say. There's hope in the form of a more naïve, loving couple, and in the tenderness of Stephanie's brother Alex towards their dying mother. It's Stephens's refusal to explain or justify the play's violence that makes the work both strong and weak, though, denying us easy answers to its tough questions about today's young people, yet also dislocating its events from any of our familiar morals.

Morning is at the Traverse Theatre until 19 August (times vary).