

Edinburgh Festival Fringe – The Hard Man ****.5



Category	Theatre
Genres	contemporary, event
Group	In Your Face Theatre
Venue	The Wee Red Bar
Times	19:00
Suitability	18+
Duration	2 hours

This dramatically dark play about the 1960s criminal Glaswegian underworld takes us on an emotional rollercoaster right into the heart of the Gorbals. Here, we witness intimately the convicted murderer Jimmy Boyle's life and the gangsters who will do whatever it takes, including murder.

A preview of the upcoming Fringe show was put on last week by In Your face Theatre and directed by Craig Boyle, who took the place of the original director Christopher Rybank, at the last minute, with Rybank taking the lead role of Johnny Byrne. The venue The Wee Red Bar perfectly suits its rough charm.

Based on the life story of notorious criminal Jimmy Boyle, it was co-written by Boyle alongside playwright Tom McGrath and performed at the Traverse in 1977, while he was serving time in Barlinnie Prison following a conviction for murder. The prison's rehabilitation program helped him find his creativity and turn his life around. Boyle has become a successful novelist and artist since his release. The play raises wider issues concerning atonement, reform of prisoners, their rehabilitation and redemption, and of justice. These are considered to be important themes because rehabilitation

programs remain controversial.

The intimate atmosphere comes from the set at The Wee Red Bar, whose artfully dingy decor with red painted walls with theatre flyers pasted all over them, and the industrial, exposed ceiling, enables you to relate to a grotty and seedy Glasgow.

The lack of a raised stage and low lighting emphasises informality and intimacy, with the closeness of the audience to the young performers whose energy and heat envelope you, and which it seems, you can reach out to touch. Their passionate performances in the centre of the floor, with the audience of about 60 gathered around its edges, and the use of the audience's entrances and exits to the room create a believable two hours, where you feel yourself a part of the performance. Here you are present with them in the Gorbals, feeling what they feel and getting inside their minds. This intimacy lends to a sympathy for their actions, as their circumstances and motivations unfold.



The strong Glasgow accents and costumes of the young cast, clearly pointed to the rough lower-class of the characters, and the clothes placed them in the recent past. Johnny's girlfriend Carole (Jessica Innes) in a white top, a high blonde ponytail and pastel pink lipstick was contrasted by the dowdy whitish Mac worn by Didi, the local gossip.

The play begins with Johnny living with his mother (Heather Hardcastle) in Glasgow's rough Gorbals. We see him from the age of 14 as, over the next few years he gets involved in criminal activities escalating in their seriousness. We learn that this started at the age of 5 when he stole chocolate and broke into bubblegum machines.

Johnny and his gang get involved with Big Danny (Gavin

McQueen) and his gang into selling masses of stolen goods, and also get involved in violence, when Didi (Christie Brown) enters with news of a murdered Spanish man. Johnny barks at her:- 'You saw nothing, we're in this together'. When he asks his mother for money for the cinema, she tells him she doesn't want the police at the door in the morning. She ends with typical motherly affection:- 'He's a good boy, it's the company he keeps'.

The extent of the violence is shown throughout the play, as all sorts of props which were used in these violent acts, batons, a screwdriver, beer bottles, a huge machete are brought forth.

The second act consists of Johnny in prison, locked in a wooden cage, as he tries to get at his captors. He is suffering, and is being beaten and bullied by the police, with Paisley (Sam Lennox) as the ringleader. Johnny ends up with his face covered in red blood and is restrained by a straightjacket for days; a ghastly sight. Paisley spits into his food. This scene of injustice makes Johnny even more determined that he will not break, despite what they try to do to him.



Compared to the second act, the first was overwhelming, with its strong characters, flashing lights and extreme behaviour, but not claustrophobically so. It was essential to concentrate fully so as not to lose the thread, as the scenes changed fast and in the low lights the male characters were initially difficult to define, perhaps due to the lack of variety in their costumes. The second scene was the opposite of the first; this was pared down with fewer characters involved. This resulted in Johnny's brutal treatment by the police being accentuated in the audience's mind.

In this brutality, we see the system, and its injustices,

embodied by the authority of policeman Paisley, and we realise that more than cheap thrills, we've come to grips with the characters in a more sensitive and human way, and we have come to understand Johnny's fragility and powerlessness.

This points to the underlying causes of the extreme behaviour, and adds dimension to his character. There is also some indication of his struggle to survive outside the law, which was just not on his side. This led to him becoming the Hard man, to the dead-end of murder, and of prison.

Writer Jimmy Boyle was given another chance with the help of the renowned Barlinnie rehabilitation programme and his dead end cast aside as he began to live in a new way.

This all provides a very positive message for today's society which often demonises prisoners as causes and scapegoats for its ills.

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