

Edinburgh Festival Fringe REVIEW -The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning *****

The Radicalisation of Bradley Manning – National Theatre Wales.



Audience awareness of Bradley Manning's imminent life-imprisonment – what writer Tim Price, director John E McGrath and cast could only have speculated upon during pre-production – lends this play a bristling, immediate context. What motives and/or possible 'madness' drove the actions of the enfant terrible, 25-year old Manning? 'Guilty' of releasing 250,000 secret embassy cables and military logs from the Iraq and Afghan wars – the play posits the existential and ambiguous moral conundrums of what might brought about his radicalisation? If, indeed, that was what it was. His childhood in Haverfordwest, Wales, could hardly have been of hot-bed of Jihadist indoctrination. However, it informs on an integral proportion of action. Tim Price's script – juxtaposing fiction with fact-finds the latter often the more unbelievable.

This Edinburgh debut production from National Theatre Wales, where the protagonist, hailed either as a cyber-hero or having

taken a mighty Wiki-leak in Uncle Sam's face, is lent further frisson with the furore and farce regarding Edwards Snowden's latest exposures of spookery.

The full mental racket of twenty-four hour, five minute, suicide-risk checks by his automaton guards remains boot-stamped in to the collective audience psyche long, long after this visceral multi-media experience. In your face, in your groin – in your worst nightmares. The in-the-round dynamic works to chilling effect with cohorts of audience seating set in hexagonal blocks. These contain and confine the rapidly shifting locations. That they may also be subliminal ciphers for drill-squad ranks is open to interpretation.

The production opens with a phalanx of monitors loop-replaying Wiki-leaked footage taken from an Apache gunship with camera cross-hairs targeting suspected civilians prior to their obliteration. (Regrettable collateral damage – no disciplinary action taken.)

Scene transitions happen with high-velocity efficiency. Manning joining Secondary school in Haverfordwest and the humiliating induction rituals. Manning naked and foetal-crouched on a metal desk – constantly harangued awake for his own safety. Its setting – an aseptic, evocation of a dissection lab. Step by incremental step Manning's journey towards 'Radicalisation' – the hows and whys – unfold with corrosive inevitability.

The technical/special-effects are stunningly conceived and realised complementing the narrative but never intrusive

except when they need to be – War is Hell, after all. Monitor-screens text-track Manning's agonised parallel inner-dialogues as he tries to make sense of both the London terrorist bombings and his parents' divorce.

So many scenes, and there are plenty, impact on the senses and emotions with startling intensity. Manning's homosexual relationship provides some tenderness but its inevitable ending may be another of his steps towards his 'radicalisation'. He wants to study at M.I.T. 'You want to be a man and join the Army? Or be gay and stay at Starbucks?' asks his father.

The narrative chronology leaps to and fro in constant flux, and perhaps the most radical of the production's own take on characterisation is that Manning's role is constantly interchangeable between male and female cast. Is he to be an archetypal Everyman? Is it that anyone of his Intel team could have done the same? Unashamedly experimental with surrealism parodying fact – the ambiguous hero/traitor is doomed to be consumed within a malevolent vortex of claustrophobic institutionalism and State-sponsored revenge. 'They cannot punish ideas so they punish the man.' The brutal irony of the play's denouement being revised only days before its Edinburgh premiere does not escape the part astonished, part chastened audience.

This dazzling achievement from a talented young company whose brazen embrace of iconoclasm and risk-taking – guided by a firm moral compass – sets the bar very high indeed. (Some distressing scenes and robust language.)

Pleasance At St Thomas of Aquin's School, Chambers Street,
Venue 17. (not Museum Of Scotland Chambers St!). Until August
25th. 90 minutes.)