

# Theatre review: Dragon, Traverse Theatre (\*\*\*\*)



It's a rare piece of theatre that can move you both with its themes and with its execution. But the almost entirely wordless *Dragon*, a three-way co-production between the National Theatre of Scotland, visual theatre company Vox Motus, and the People's Art Theatre of Tianjin, China, is as gripping in its stagecraft as it is touching in its storytelling. The result, though marketed as a family show, is a deeply rewarding 75 minutes of theatre whose serious undercurrents will satisfy adults as much as its playful staging will delight youngsters.

It's rare, too, for a piece of family theatre to confront grief so boldly. *Dragon's* central character, teenage Tommy, is having a tough time – he's bullied at school, and awkward around girls, but most importantly, he's sent spinning by the death of his mother – an event that's covered with an admirable sensitivity in Candice Edmunds and Jamie Harrison's eloquent production. So when a dragon appears at his bedroom window – initially in a magical transformation of a street lamp – he's shocked, fearful, but later proud of his new companion and the power it brings him. Until the dragon, ceaselessly growing in size and strength, starts to call the shots, that is.

Scott Miller, making his professional debut, is remarkably expressive as the tormented Tommy, his face a mixture of bewilderment and wide-eyed enthusiasm as he negotiates the strength and the responsibilities that his new protector offers him. Adura Onashile charms as kind-hearted neighbour Vanessa, and two Tianjin-based actors – Zhang Kai and Tao Yan – slot in effortlessly to the Scottish cast, bringing a

vibrant physicality to their roles.

But it's the slick, imaginative staging that's most memorable – not least the snake-like dragons that emerge from the unlikeliest places, manipulated with convincing fluidity by the actors. A swimming pool scene is beautifully delivered, with cast members donning sky-blue hoodies to become the water, and a rooftop setpiece in which a chimney transforms into a gigantic flying dragon is simply breathtaking.

There are some moments when the pace flags a little, and Tim Phillips's music, though highly effective, is sometimes a little derivative. But despite its visual flair, *Dragon* is far more than just a feast for the eyes: it's a thoughtful, solidly constructed piece, with a strong if difficult message of the importance of family love and support over fantasy.

**[Dragon](#)** continues at the **[Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh](#)**, until **Saturday 2 November**, travelling to the **[Lowry, Salford Quays](#)**, for performances on 8 and 9 November

