

Our pick of Edinburgh Festival Fringe – Paper Hearts the Musical



Liam O'Rafferty's world premier Paper Hearts has the endearing if not daringly kitsch me quick naïf strapline – 'A High Street Musical'. A giddy musical rom-com set in an independent bookshop (no, forget Notting Hill, this show is based firmly in reality) the hero in waiting, shop assistant, Atticus Smith, really does need to get his act or rather his plot together and finish that nebulous opus he calls his blockbuster first novel. He is soon to be confronted by its protagonists who step outside the pages demanding he both jolly well completes the book and adopts some serious Man-up attitude pretty darn quick.

And well he needs to because his new manager, Lilly Sprocket, is about to initiate some startling new practices that will turn his world upside down. Uplifting, passionate, deliciously escapist Paper Hearts the Musical promises a topsy-turvy, giddy explosion of song and dance enough to steam-up even the starchiest of librarian's glasses.

Two parallel worlds, Atticus's own modern-day life, and the 1940s Russia torn apart by the 2nd World War that his characters inhabit. The thumping upbeat numbers of the contemporary pop-folk score performed by a company of 11 actors (many performing as actor-musicians) guide you through a tale of love, passion, and betrayal, among books.

The Edinburgh Reporter spoke with writer Liam O'Rafferty almost literally on the hop mid rehearsals. He was adamant

that but for the incredible support of Moon Rock Productions' director, Tania Azevedo, and musical director, Daniel Jarvis, after four years graft he would still be a little minnow in a shark-infested sea.

Two lonely people, two worlds apart, too afraid to dream too much until love walks through the shop door and their hearts go ting-a-ling.

TER: Long, long ago, you are sitting down for a break at a corporate conference in Swindon in your capacity as the graphic designer when you have a life changing Damascene moment of creativity (if any readers have experienced the psychosis inducing traffic islands/one-way systems in Swindon this isn't as strange as it might sound). Tell us about it.

LO: I'm 52 and as far as social media is concerned I'm definitely old school. I didn't have any musical background as such, a few odd songs with a rock band in Swindon aside. I had to start from scratch, I didn't know anyone in the music business at all – sorry, and I'm sort of jumping the gun here! (Liam's enthusiasm is near exhausting, as for jumping the gun, chatting with him is more akin to Evel Knievel leaping over a battery of field artillery exploding in unison. We decide to give his one-liner narrative free rein.)

x

Liam
O'Rafferty

TER: This bookshop motif, Liam?

LO: Ah, yes, there's a bookshop in Devizes run by a wonderful lady called Jo Batchelor, it's called (wait for it) Devizes Books. She's been brilliant and has already raised £500 and counting to help take the show to Edinburgh. As you know the story is set in a bookshop.

TER: In the napalm volatility that is Swindon's creative oeuvre you transform from graphic designer to musical composer. Explain.

LO: I'd already written some songs and tried them out on my wife's Am-Dram friends. Nothing really came of that as a show. I eventually met up with Tania (Azevedo) who helped pull everything together. It took a very long time to get in to the musical theatre world. People weren't taking me seriously – no experience, never written before. Tania and Daniel (Jarvis) steered me in the right direction.

TER: What came first, the plot or the songs or did they inspire and feed off each other in development? When did you hit on a unifying context?

LO: As you know I was taking a break at a corporate function watching the guys setting up the stage and I thought to myself, 'Wouldn't it be great if that stage turned in to a bookshop with songs and dancing.' From that I had to create some characters. I'd quite a few songs as I said earlier. I pinched the hero's name Atticus from To Kill A Mockingbird; the surname Smith sort of establishes him as a Mister ordinary.

TER: Is it correct that you originally had two separate shows in mind?

LO: Initially yes, one would have been about Atticus and Lilly working in the shop and the other about the characters who step out from his novel. It was Tania who guided me towards combining them in to one coherent plot.

TER: How did you go about casting the characters?

LO: I'll give you the simpler version, which it certainly wasn't to begin with! We used an online site that is dedicated to this process and is the default choice for many professional actors. We soon had over one thousand expressions

of interest, four hundred for the role of Lilly alone.

The production team did the serious work paring it down to about sixty promising actors. That's when I stepped in. We used to meet at The National Gallery and look through the long-list. To be honest it was quite emotional for me doing that, seeing all coming together at last. Last month we had the auditions, we are rehearsing like mad as we speak and then there will be one preview at the Waterloo East Theatre on July 30th.

Then it's straight to Edinburgh.

TER: So finally, Liam, and we ask this without prejudice or favour, who came up with that strapline – 'A High Street Musical'?

L0: I did.

Paper Hearts the Musical
Musicals and Opera (musical theatre, comedy)

Underbelly Med Quad (Venue 302) 18:40 1 hour 15 minutes.
Suitability: 12+ (Guideline)

<https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on#q=%22Paper%20Hearts%20the%20Musical%22>

<http://www.paperheartsmusical.com>