

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2016 REVIEW – The Red Shed

☒ Multi award-winning comic/activist Mark Thomas performed his first gigs in The Red Shed in Wakefield, a 47-foot-long wooden hut that doubles up as a Labour Club. Three decades later he returns to celebrate its 50th birthday, entwining the story of his political coming of age with the tale of the people who inspired him.

The struggle for hope and survival in a shed, a story of strikes, fights, dinner ladies and beer; friendship, love, memory and above all belief. Theatre, stand-up, journalism, activism and a small amount of help from the audience.

[Mark Thomas](#) is a bastard, plain and simple. Each year he's one of the first names I look for in the Fringe brochure, wondering if his new show will measure up to the previous one. For at least the last six years he has and more. That run could be longer but I'm trying to remember what came before Bravo Figaro and failing. With [The Red Shed](#) the wee bugger has done it again and left me in tears both from laughter and the emotion of it all.

As seems to have become a recurring theme with the shows I've seen this year, this is a performance that deals with memory and identity. Given that, I'm going to follow in Mark's lead and talk a little about me before I review the show.

What hack reviewer doesn't after all?

I first saw Mark Thomas perform at some point in 1987, although I can't remember if it was at somewhere like the Putney Half Moon or

on Channel 4's Saturday Zoo.

I can even remember some of the routine, how supermarkets should play the Clash and arresting Police Officers' have to do comply with one request before nicking you.

Since then, he has regularly made me laugh until my sides hurt – turning up at a McDonald's drive-through in a clown car with clowns and wanting to know why they refuse to serve him is still a highlight, as is blowing a TV show's production budget on a huddle in the 2:30 at Donny. He's also made me think, change my shopping habits and get involved with various political causes and activism.

I've stood with him at various demos over the years, including when we all fell down 'dead' on Princes Street at the sound of the One O'Clock Gun to protest the UK's involvement in invading Iraq.

In short, he is the man I would like to become, albeit a better looking and more West, less Sarf one. I took [the Redskins'](#) advice to heart, I didn't make him a hero but instead used him as inspiration.

My first real political act, apart from shouting "Fascists!" and "Viva Islas Malvinas!" at my school's CCF troupe along with my pal Terry McCann* in 1982, was the Miners' Strike in 1984. I signed the various petitions, went on a demo about it and bought Between the Wars. I even went to [A Concert for Heroes](#), a benefit concert at the Royal Albert Hall – I know, it was a very, very strange experience and still the only time I've gone in the place – held to show support and raise funds for the miners and their families, who were left in financial need following the industrial action.

From then on, well, I think you can guess the rest but I have a lot of memories and lessons from the time.

The reason for referencing the Miners' Strike – 1984-5, not 1926 – is that this show is about Mark's experience as a student in Wakefield at the time and his involvement in supporting the strikers. In particular, it centres on a march back to the colliery after the strike ended a school children singing in support of the men from their playground.

The show is a question of memory. Are the ones we hold dearest and closest to our heart suffered from a dose of retcon at various points over the years? Have we improved them to make them easier to deal with and better stories to tell?

The play centres on [the Red Shed](#), the Wakefield Labour Club, where a teenager drama student stood up for the local people who were on the sharp end from the Police, betrayal from the Labour Party's leadership, the UK Government, the Fourth Estate and, most viciously, **THAT WOMAN**. Joolz Denby was right, once they beat the miners everybody else meekly fell into place and part of our heritage and souls died.

Thankfully though, that spirit still exists in the Red Shed and in Mark Thomas.

During the show we go through over thirty years of personal history and political activism. How the destruction of Britain's industrial heartlands led to this year's Brexit result. How people were left without hope or a belief that the future help something worthwhile to strive to achieve.

At times I was in tears, not for the first time this August,

as I remembered the events of the 1984-5 but more from the current stories of people in the Wakefield area.

How little they have and how those who are meant to work to protect their interests have not so much turned their backs as strode away from their natural supporters.

However, the play is not depressing but instead it is uplifting. About how minor acts can give people hope, how defiance and belief in your fellow men, women and community is not something that are something left in the cupboards of years gone by. That we can make a difference if we band together, that there is still power in the union and that there is nothing like a pint of beer and a political barney for forging strong relationships that last for decades.

You should see this show if you remember the Miners' Strike; if you want to learn of the UK's recent political history and the betrayal of the working class; if you want to hear a Sarf Londoner comedy gently rib Morningside ladies; if you want to see a great drama that is also about personal beliefs and identity. Most of all, you should see this show because it's chuffing brilliant. Again. The Bastard!

Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever.

Solidarity forever, For the union makes us strong.

*No, really, that was his name.