

Theatre REVIEW – Once Upon a Time in Wigan ***

The Edinburgh University Theatre Company's *Once Upon a Time in Wigan* has a lot going for it. An enthusiastic young cast, an audience of students keen to enjoy the night, and that sweet, sweet, Northern Soul music. The Northern Soul scene was defined by a search for neglected, should've-been soul classics, and as the show begins, Maxine, Suzanne, and Danny are lost in music on the floor of the legendary Wigan Casino. No wonder the cast's fourth member, Eugene, becomes entranced.



The cast of *Once Upon a Time in Wigan*

What's more, as revealed by Northern Soul aficionado Stuart Cosgrove in his *Young Soul Rebels*, and to a rapt audience at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival, Northern Soul was the soundtrack to an outsized number of stories. By an accident of time and setting, the scene crossed paths with everything from the industrial decline of the North to the rise of "God's Copper", the Greater Manchester Chief Constable, James Anderton; from a burgeoning awareness of the tumult of the civil rights movement to the human tragedy of the disappearances of the victims of the Yorkshire Ripper.

Yet, watching *Once Upon a Time in Wigan*, one wouldn't have any idea of the richness of this tapestry other than the very millennial dissatisfaction of the four-strong cast with their employment circumstances, and a blink-and-you'll-miss-it reference to Arthur Scargill. Mick Martin's play debuted in 2003 and is still being revived thirteen years later, yet one can't shake the feeling that this is more down to the enduring mystique of the Northern Scene than to anything in the play itself.

Except for Eugene and Danny firing song titles at each other in a kind of Northern Soul poker, there's nothing to suggest that *Once Upon a Time in Wigan* is anything other than a very traditional four-handed romantic drama that could be set anywhere, any time. The jokes are just as formulaic, and the characters are – for the most part – not sympathetic or self-aware enough to carry that sort of story.

For all the audience's energy, it's too much to ask of a student production to breathe life into the script. Nevertheless, a word of praise must go to Francesca Sellors, who brings a charisma to the role of Maxine that suggests something of the matriarchal thread that ran through the scene before her role, like those of Eugene, Suzanne, and Danny, stutters, then putters out.

What eventually happens to the characters of *Once Upon a Time in Wigan*? In the end, it's hard to care any more than they do.

Once Upon a Time in Wigan ended its run at the Bedlam Theatre on 29 October