

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2017 – Died Blondes**

“Died Blondes” is an ambitious attempt to depict the last hours of two fascinating and flawed women – Ruth Ellis and Marilyn Monroe.

The show is presented as two separate monologues with little attempt to draw any parallels between them although there are hints of common themes: both were caught up in a violent cycle in which they were victims and femme fatales.

Ruth Ellis’s monologue takes the form of a letter to David Blakely, the man she killed, in which she reflects upon their tempestuous relationship and recreates his murder.

There is some powerful dramatic writing describing Blakely’s abusive behaviour towards Ellis and her brutal revenge. The murderous and mundane are mixed together from the nondescript location in which the killing takes place to Ellis’s description of Blakely’s blood congealing like gravy.

There is also a significant twist causing the audience to reconsider Ellis’s character and fate. The monologue fails however to develop the third significant character in the crime: Ellis’s second lover Desmond Cussen, the man who gave her the gun.

✘ The letter format of Ruth Ellis’s monologue provides a pretext for the writer and performer, Joan Ellis (no relation to Ruth, she emphasises) to have her script in hand.

It’s a debatable pretext and one that fails completely in the second monologue as Marilyn Monroe. Ellis tells the audience that she will perform this piece behind a screen so that the audience can focus on the words. The strong suspicion is that the ruse is for Ellis’s own benefit in order to read from her

script.

Portraying Marilyn Monroe is a difficult challenge for any actress. Portraying Marilyn Monroe as she drifts in and out of a narcotic haze whilst holding what might be a hallucinatory telephone conversation with Joe DiMaggio while suffering from real or paranoid fears of being murdered sets the bar as high as it can possibly go in imagining Marilyn.

Unfortunately, Joan Ellis fails to convince either as actress or dramatist in this monologue. The acting is a distant echo of Monroe's distinctive tones. The script oscillates between lurid conspiracy theories about the Kennedys' role in Monroe's death and recaps of her turbulent life story. The predominant images are of Monroe as victim and sex siren.

There's no sign of the wit and intelligence that Monroe also possessed. Nor is there a strong enough sense of tragedy. Marilyn Monroe had the strength, will and acumen to overcome the adversities of her early life but she could never escape them.

It's a pity that the play doesn't acknowledge this or what Monroe did achieve in her short life.

"Died Blondes" could have been an explosive set of Atomic Blondes. Instead, it fizzles out like rained upon fireworks.