

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 REVIEW : 3 Years, 1 Week and a Lemon Drizzle****

'I became the oldest when I was still the youngest'

Kate is a drama student. She's good at stuff – she passes exams, gets auditions for drama school, knows how to bake. Alex, her older sister, isn't quite such a high achiever.

When Alex goes to university and comes, or rather is brought, back suffering from anorexia nervosa, everyone's life changes. In *3 Years, 1 Week and a Lemon Drizzle*, real-life sisters Alexandra and Kate Donnachie show us the devastating effects of eating disorders. It's not just Alex who fights her demons; the disease attacks everyone in its orbit. Now Alex and Kate attempt to come to terms with Alex's illness or, as the family calls it, *That Time*.

Alex and Kate bicker about everything; sisters usually do. Who's best at this, who's top at that, who does the cat love more...nothing is off limits in the world of sibling rivalry. But midway through their banter about childhood scraps and squabbles, Alex plays a blinder;

'A few years ago I was given six months to live.'



It is a short and shocking moment, one made all the more effective by the women's immediate return to arguing about jobs, cakes and exams. *3 Years, 1 Week and a Lemon Cake* has several such moments, for we soon see that behind all the light-hearted point-scoring lies unfathomable pain and confusion. Alex wants to be loved, and she wants to be the same big sister she was before *That Time*. Kate wants to support Alex, but anorexia is an impenetrable carapace – and she also wants her own life back, one that doesn't revolve around Alex's problems;

'I was never annoyed about our parents giving her all their attention. *I put up with it.*'

Alex wants to tell the audience about anorexia – 'fun facts about eating disorders' – but as she reels them off, she's stuffing food into her mouth until she becomes incoherent. She wants to tell them about her breakdown at college, how all she

wanted was for her Dad to come and get her ('I needed him to come and save me') but she can only do so while running on the spot. Standing still just doesn't burn enough calories.

The sisters start innumerable jolly chats about everything from baking to Joan Bakewell, but Kate has only to say one innocent 'wrong' word for Alex to shut down completely. Alex has told Kate that she can ask her *anything* about *That Time* – but in the end Alex can't bring herself to answer, instead changing the subject while trying to sound as in charge as she can, her efforts becoming increasingly manic and desperate. Because in an anorexic's world, control is vital, and Alex needs to control this conversation just as much as she needs to police her food intake. She can't reveal what she really feels because the pain and embarrassment would destroy her. In one particularly moving scene, Alex and Kate fight over who will eat a Mars Bar, Alex describing how she wants to consume it in almost sexual detail – but of course it's winning that she wants, not the chocolate, which in the end she can't bring herself to try;

'I'm not hungry. No-one gets the Mars Bar.'

Alex has the need to manipulate Kate, and to use her sister to deflect attention from her own feelings. Kate brilliantly conveys her sense of sadness, irritation and despair; her dominant facial expression is one of hesitation and fear. When Alex makes Kate read a script that she has written about how Kate felt when Alex was seriously ill, all of Alex's fears surface. Did the family think she was just starving herself for attention? Did they plan her funeral? Did Kate not cry in front of Alex to protect her, or because she didn't care? '*How much did they love me?*'

When Kate finally gets a chance to talk about how she felt at *That Time*, she tells of her worry, her loneliness, her protectiveness of Alex – and of her anger. When Kate asks Alex to talk about how she felt, Alex simply buries her head in her

old baby blanket and screams. Despite a childhood that she insists was caring and loving, she can't stop beating herself up. It is only when she reads Kate's diary aloud that she discovers Kate's own personal issues at *That Time* – her anxieties about getting into drama school, her confusion about what sort of theatre she should study.

And where does that lemon drizzle cake come in? You'll have to see the show to find out, but like everything else in this deeply personal show, it's drenched in meaning.

Sisters can love each other, support each other, but also sometimes hate each other. In *3 Years, 1 Week and a Lemon Drizzle*, Alex and Kate Donnachie explore some of the many complexities of family dynamics, and the way that childhood events, be they ever so minor, can reverberate throughout adult life. Their story is often funny; it's also often heart-wrenchingly sad.

This story doesn't have a neat ending; Alex still has bad days, days when she wishes she'd never been 'made to get better'. We witness her difficult and obsessive relationship with food, her volatility and her fear. All of this, however, only adds to the play's validity, because real life is messy, and in a world where most of us (perhaps especially women) feel powerless, many anorexics never do get completely better; they just learn to control their need to control.

What shines through, however, is how much Alex and Kate care about one another. Kate's care for Alex is perhaps more immediately obvious, but as the story plays out, Alex's guilt and shame become palpable, and we realise that Alex wants more than anything to reciprocate, to be the big sister she once was; to love and to be loved.

3 Years, 1 Week and a Lemon Drizzle is at Underbelly, Bristo Square until 27 August (not Monday 13 August).

Tickets are available from the Fringe [here](#) or from the

Underbelly Box Offices.