

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 REVIEW : A Fortunate Man***

What do we want when we visit a doctor? To be cured, but also – perhaps more importantly – to be listened to, to be understood. Throughout **New Perspectives Theatre Company's** interesting 'guided tour' of John Berger and Jean Mohr's classic *A Fortunate Man* two words are heard again and again;

'I know, I know.'

The book, subtitled *The Story of a Country Doctor*, is about John 'Sassall', a GP in the Forest of Dean, where Berger lived in the early 1960s. Berger began as his patient and ended up being his friend until Sassall's death in 1982; he wrote *A Fortunate Man* at the suggestion of Victor Anant, who knew them both. Otherwise, Anant said, 'One day no-one will know of him.' They saw Sassall as a kind of Renaissance figure, one who tried to educate himself in all things, and to provide everything he could to those who needed it most.



Sassall was in many ways the traditional rural doctor, driving out in his old Landrover to visit patients in their homes, knowing them from cradle to grave, concerning himself with their social and financial problems as much as with their medical needs. Berger writes about him as only Berger can, with an economy that gives weight to every word and an unemotional style that throws into sharp relief the tragedies of everyday life.

Jean Mohr's black and white photographs of the landscape, the

people and the doctor himself are not just illustrations, they are as integral a part of the story as Berger's wonderful prose. At Summerhall the photographs are projected onto a screen above the set, and seeing them this large emphasises their cohesion with the text. Berger was wary of photographs that looked 'too beautiful'; these do not. Instead they draw us in to the daily life of this community. The old lady talking to Sassall in her sitting room, the Landrover making its way up a wintry track, headlamps blazing, a woman pressing her handkerchief to her eyes to stop the tears.

'We (Berger and Mohr) have to walk together in step with the story.'

Yet, although the book refers only obliquely to Sassall's own problems, he had many, not least what would now be diagnosed as bipolar disorder. In this performance, **Hayley Doherty** and **Matthew Brown** re-enact scenes from the text while interweaving them with the realities of GP practice in 21st century Britain. Unfortunately the references to today's healthcare system are less successful than the episodes from Sassall's life; when Doherty and Brown play modern day doctors, sitting opposite each other while reciting GPs' comments relayed to them through headphones, it is impossible to hear what they are saying. This may or may not be intentional – it might be a reference to the way in which individuals get lost in the huge, unwieldy, time-and-cash-short NHS, but it comes across as confusing rather than illuminating.

A Fortunate Man continues beyond Berger's narrative to complete the story of Sassall's later life, which, as doctor and writer Gavin Francis explains in his excellent modern preface to the book;

'stands as a warning of what can happen when boundaries between a physician and his patients break down'

Doherty and Brown play Sassall and his wife Betty, who hardly

appears in the book; here Betty is given a greater role, for it is known that she played a huge part in Sassall's life, doing everything from dispensing medicines to keeping medical records, bringing up their children and managing Sassall's increasingly precarious mental health. Both Doherty and Brown convey the essential tenderness of this relationship; she pours his tea, makes his toast, soothes his sorrows. They also play a variety of locals who feature in scenes recorded by Berger (he and Mohr stayed with Sassall, at the doctor's invitation, for six weeks during the writing of the book.)

The play grew from a research project, for which *New Perspectives* interviewed many doctors and also Sassall's surviving son. The actors have a strange habit of referring to page numbers in the book ('on page 39...'); I am not entirely sure why they do this, unless it is to place a distance between the doctor's story and the play, to emphasise that *the book* is the thing. It certainly pushes us away from a close identification with Sassall; he is distant, a character in a book even though he was a real person.

The use of props in this production is clever and effective. In the well-known story of Sassall attending a woodman whose leg has been crushed by a falling tree, a branch is used to represent the man, and his leg. When Sassall goes to visit a family living in a derelict farm cottage, we know he is there only because he holds a bucket under the dripping roof. There were, however, some scenes when I couldn't quite understand what was going on. Why does Donachie throw pages of the book all over the floor? And why does Brown walk around at one point with his hand held out in a strange position?

After Betty's sudden death, everything went downhill for Sassall. Without her he was lost, he had nobody to share his burdens. In 1978 his much-loved daughter had a stroke. His mental health deteriorated so much that he was forced into unwilling retirement. Berger went to visit him but was not well received. He had met a new partner and planned to

remarry, but instead he went into the bathroom and shot himself.

No-one really knows why he ended his life; there was no note. The consensus, such as it is, is that Sassall became so overwhelmed by the possibility of having to face something he could not cure, by the sheer tragedy inherent in human life, that he could continue no longer. He had attempted suicide at least three times before, but Betty had been able to stop him. In this play, it is suggested that Sassall knew he could not live with being happy (ie with his new partner) but this seems unconvincing when, despite their sometimes tempestuous marriage, he had been happy with Betty.

In his later years Sassall had thought he was 'a doctor for yesterday', but the empathy and care that he showed to his patients, his wish always to learn more, to do more, has made him a continuing role model for today's GPs. Gavin Francis again;

'Sassall's goal was an intimate appreciation of what it means to be human; medicine was just the vehicle he chose to reach it...(the book remains) a reminder for physicians and patients alike of the essence of medical practice – of the differences between healing and medicating'

Whether Sassall was indeed 'a fortunate man', or whether his own perfectionism sealed his fate, is a question unanswered by Berger. Here, as in the book, it is left to the reader/viewer to draw his own conclusions.

A Fortunate Man is at Summerhall (Venue 26) until 26 August (no performance on 13 or 20 August).

Tickets are available from the Fringe Box Office here: <https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on/fortunate-man> or direct from Summerhall: <https://festival18.summerhall.co.uk/?s=a+fortunate+man>

