

# Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 REVIEW : **bloominauschwitz\*\*\*\*\***

Leopold Bloom is stuck. Stuck in a book, stuck in a routine, stuck in the same clothes. He's even stuck on the toilet.

As the hero of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Bloom's life is entirely a creation of the author. He is everyman and no man, a genial soul required to repeat the events of 16 June 1904 forever. But when Bloom starts to question things, to abandon Joyce and look for his own identity, he discovers that nothing is as simple as it seems, and that becoming too obsessed with any one point of view can have terrible consequences.

In *bloominauschwitz*, Menagerie Theatre's absorbing new one-man play, Bloom takes us with him on a fascinating, entertaining, and ultimately terrifying journey. In a breathtakingly skilful performance, **Patrick Morris** captures Bloom's innocence, fear and desperation as he realises that he is just a work of fiction and does not even know his own name ('Oh! The oblivion that I face!'), and is led by his alter ego ('Bloom Future') from 1904 to the present day.

The toilet is a pivotal prop in this small stage set. It's like an oracle; lights flash and noise sounds every time it is opened, but it cannot tell Bloom anything, no matter how many times he asks. He is delighted to find a letter stuck into his hat band – now he knows he belongs in Dublin, in Ireland, in his family – but before long doubts creep in about that, and Bloom Future soon confirms that there's a lot more to Bloom's life than a terraced house in Eccles Street and a daily saunter past the Western Row Post Office.

Morris takes us effortlessly from a set-to with a nationalist in Barney Kiernan's pub (where it begins to dawn on Bloom that

he is partly Jewish) to a confrontation with his dead father, a refugee from Szombathely in Hungary. As Bloom becomes more and more excited about finding a 'tribe' where he might belong, so Bloom Future drags him towards Auschwitz, where over 4,000 Szombathely Jews (very effectively represented by long paper chains of people) died. Suddenly Bloom isn't sure he wants to be a Hungarian Jew any more. He argues with Joyce;

'What did you know of this? What did you do when you made me a Jew?'

Bloom Senior tells his son that he has two choices, 'to remember or to forget'. He himself changed his name, and 'buried the goulash of us in the lamb stew of Ireland.'

*bloominauschwitz* is as rich in wordplay, puns and allusions as *Ulysses* itself. It is also full of jokes. I felt I was running to keep up with Bloom's stream of consciousness, but when I did keep up the rewards were great. There are so many layers of meaning in this play – you would probably need to see it several times to appreciate its content to the full. Morris keeps the narrative pounding along, expertly reflecting Bloom's mood as he swings from joy to horror and back again. He is furious with his father, whom he feels has betrayed him, unsure of Molly, his beloved wife, heartbroken by the death of his infant son, delighted when he hears from his daughter Milly.



After Auschwitz, Bloom moves on to another role – and again finds that eutopia is not as good as he thought it might be. His live-and-let-live attitude is at odds with the extremists around him, and once again he is ostracised, this time for not being Jewish *enough*. As the narrative races towards its conclusion Bloom is shown yet another side of extremism through a letter from Milly, now working in an Israeli kibbutz.

Patrick Morris handles this arduous role with consummate skill. He kept my attention throughout and I at no point found the story dragging, indeed it *had* to be as long as it was (90 minutes) to convey its messages, to show us just how easy it is for history to repeat itself.

*bloominauschwitz* is an outstanding study of our need for identity, and of how that need can overflow into hatred and horror. This is not just something that happened in history books. It is happening now.

*Bloominauschwitz* by Richard Fredman won Best New Play Award at Brighton Fringe 2015. It is at St John's Church Hall, Princes Street (Venue 127) until 25 August (not 12, 16 or 19 August).

It is not suitable for children under the age of 14. Tickets are available from the Just Festival Box Office in St John's Church, from the Fringe Box Offices or online here <https://tickets.edfringe.com/whatson#q=%22bloominauschwitz%22>.