

# Edinburgh Fringe 2019 REVIEW

## Madame Ovary ★★★★★

**When Rosa Hesmondhalgh was a teenager, she hated her body. A few years later, her body started hating her back.**

Hesmondhalgh was just 23, a recent drama graduate trying, like thousands of other 23 year olds, to make her career in London, when she was diagnosed with a rare form of ovarian cancer. This August at the Pleasance Dome, she tells her story in *Madame Ovary*, a powerful, funny, one-woman show about a disease that kills over 4,000 women in the UK every year – and more particularly, about what it's like to be dumped with it when you're forty years younger than the 'average' sufferer.

*Madame Ovary* is a fast-moving production; it opens with Hesmondhalgh running on the spot – trying to keep to her new year's resolutions to be fitter, along with nicer, more successful, all the usual stuff. Like most of us, she lives her life at high speed, rushing about, having a go at everything, finishing nothing, wishing she wasn't 'needy', that she could fulfil others' expectations, that she had more followers on Instagram...

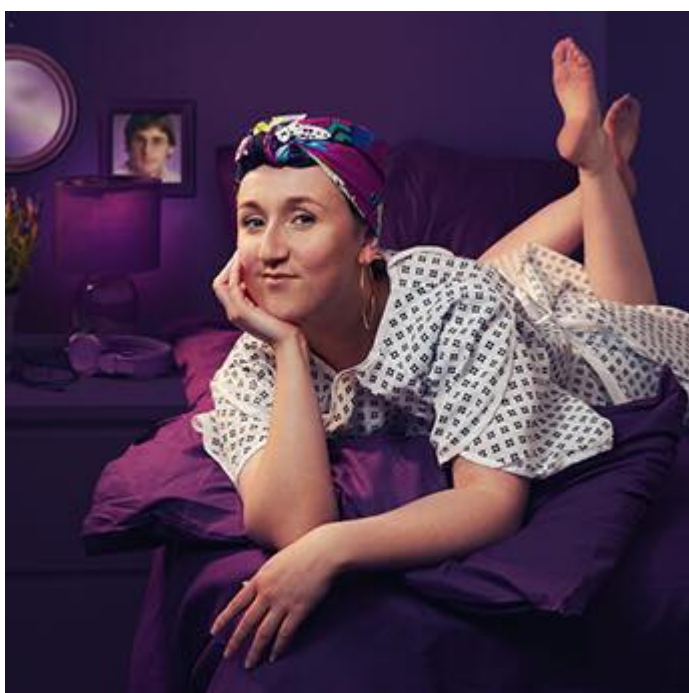
She swipes through Tinder (cleverly shown on the screen behind her) as fast as she flits through everything else, but on the very night that she finally has a promising date, the symptoms that she's been trying to ignore – bloating, fullness, exhaustion, and finally a 'dead' leg – become too much and she ends up in hospital.

From then on, things become serious, though they *don't* become depressing – Hesmondhalgh's hugely energetic delivery never flags, and through all the details of doctors, tests, more

doctors, more tests, she keeps us not only engaged – I was on the edge of my seat at times – but also entertained. She can find a funny side to things while still conveying the fear, panic and sheer horror that must sweep over anyone in her situation.

The screen – the only prop – is used again to show us the nurse's questions – 'Are you sexually active?' – and Hesmondhalgh's discussion of the possible replies to that one is laugh-out-loud funny. Her description of being wheeled through a frenetic, noisy A & E department – the shouting, the machinery, the chaos – is a gigantic, almost tangible, sensory overload, simultaneously realistic and surreal.

Cancer patients often say that at their diagnosis all they heard was 'cancer, cancer, cancer' – the rest was white noise; Hesmondhalgh's non-stop monologue brilliantly conveys the thoughts flying through her head, a weird, tumbling, and totally identifiable mixture of everything from death to dating and back again. We feel that we were there, while being eternally grateful that we weren't. A panic attack is also so convincingly acted that I really did wonder whether it was part of the show or not.



Hesmondhalgh uses her body well to express her descent from lively health to grinding illness; her facial expressions convey so much, gradually becoming more and more drained and confused as her situation becomes horribly clear. She doesn't hold back on telling us about the side-effects of her treatment, but as she moves from emergency case to long-term hospital inmate, other, less expected, things become part of her story – her friends, her family, the people she meets, the people who really do understand. And the kindness of strangers.

There are a couple of especially poignant, beautiful moments which are still bringing tears to my eyes 24 hours later. Phone videos of her and her friends in her hospital room and afterwards are a great touch, and help to remind us that this is no fiction. This woman, this actress in front of us, is the very woman who lay in that bed looking like, and indeed facing, death.

Hesmondhalgh is now in remission. She developed this play from a blog she wrote about her experiences, because she wants women, and most importantly young women, to realise that ovarian cancer can happen to them, to be aware of the symptoms, and not to be fobbed off by health professionals who haven't seen the disease in pre-menopausal women. And she wants young women to know that they are not alone.

Cancer changes lives, and *Madame Ovary* encourages us to change the way we think about that.

Before her diagnosis, Hesmondhalgh was struggling to find a way to tell her own story. Cancer may not have been the story she would have chosen to tell, but tell it she does, in this deeply moving, thought-provoking – and very entertaining – show.

*Madame Ovary* is at the Pleasance Dome, Potterow (Venue 23) at 12.10pm every day (except 13 August) until 26<sup>th</sup> August. Tickets

from the Fringe Box Office on the Royal Mile, by phone on 0131 226 0000 or online here: <https://tickets.edfringe.com/whats-on>

More information and support is available from: [Ovarian Cancer Action](#), [Macmillan](#), [trekstock](#) and [Ovacome](#).

Note: this review is based on a preview (*Madame Ovary's* very first Edinburgh performance) – so the show will be even better when you see it.