

# Edinburgh Fringe 2024: *Pool (No Water)* □□□□

Mark Ravenhill's *Pool (No Water)* was written between 2005 and 2006. Almost twenty years later, Fuzed Theatre Company are staging it at this year's Fringe. How does it hold up? Pretty well actually; its themes of friendship, success, jealousy and the ethics of art are, after all, universal.

A group of girls graduate from art school together. They used to call themselves The Group. They all do well enough – but one of them achieves meteoric international success. She's left them all behind, and try as they might to be glad for her, they're consumed with envy. Who wouldn't be?

Many of us will secretly identify with that feeling. A friend makes it big, and although we know we should applaud, what we really want to do is find a reason why it hasn't happened to us. Are they really any good, or just good at pretending? Maybe they had a trust fund – no worrying about rent and bills for them! No wonder they had time to create something better. Or maybe they slept their way to the top (this insult is, of course, almost exclusively reserved for women)?

In *Pool (No Water)* the girls express disgust that their friend has created art out of the bloody bandages of one of the group who died of AIDS. How could she? They would never have done that. They're also self-righteous about Sally, another of their friends who died in a hospice. They visited her, cared about her – but the Successful One only turned up for the

funeral, at which she thanked them for looking after Sally, and said that she too 'should have been there.' Oh no! they reply; it was no bother.

Society encourages us to tell these lies, to keep the peace and avoid confrontation. Of course, as soon as the Successful One has left, the others lay into her for all they're worth, even blaming her for Sally's death,

*"None of us was supposed to be famous! You took away the balance, one goes up, one goes down."*

*'It's funny how we harboured murderous hatred all the time she was among us.'*

Some of the girls do say the right things, telling the others that they should all move on – but even they can't stop themselves from having angry thoughts. The actors, all of whom perform well, frequently swap characters – none has a set role – and this device serves to emphasise the strange cohesion that friends' groups often seem to have. The girls are all complicit, there is no one saint, no one sinner. In our hearts we are all a mixture of darkness and light.

So when the Successful One invites them all to visit her mansion, complete with pool, it doesn't take much to persuade them to put aside their scruples and jet off to the sun. There are very few props in this production, but the cast mimes the plane journey well. And when they arrive, it almost seems like old times as they chat about their college days, get high and drink the night away.

Then their host suggests they all go skinny dipping in her pool,

*'She's still naughty! It's like ten years ago. It's beautiful. We laugh and cry and are moved by it.'*

They describe the perfect arc that she creates as she dives into the pool.

There is (as is clear from the title) no water in the pool. It's been drained.

The friends watch the Successful One writhe and jerk on the tiles. And part of each one of them is delighted. It's justice. It's the penalty for flying too high. Serves you right.

And now Ravenhill moves from his interrogation of success to his second theme; art. The girls may have criticised the Successful One for using Rory's death as good material, but now a similar opportunity has come their way. Will they take it? Is there no boundary that art should not cross? Is everything a legitimate subject? Or should the artist sometimes look away?

Group dynamics are at the centre of *Pool (No Water)*. Alone, each one of the girls would probably have acted differently, but here no one dominates, so no one feels the full weight of responsibility, no conscience is seriously troubled. It's as though the group takes on a character of its own. It's almost a *Lord of the Flies* moment,

*'We feel as one.'*

The use of silver cut outs to represent tablets is especially effective; when the girls all hold these in the air it is tantamount to a tribal rallying cry, a ceremonial dance before hostilities commence,

*'The triumph pulsing through our torsos.'*

And as a group they start to take over their injured friend's home; they use the gym, they swim, they consult her personal trainer. They want what she has, and suddenly they can take

it. They can become her. ('I WANT TO BE PRIVILEGED!')

Until the Successful One wakes up.

What happens next is not what they, or we, might have expected. As the balance of power shifts yet again, the girls achieve a kind of catharsis. We, however, are left considering our own behaviour, our own thoughts. Are we really as moral as we like to think? Or have we just lacked the opportunity to be bad?

*Pool (No Water)* is a challenging play, ably performed by this group of young actors, who did particularly well in keeping the dialogue quick and sharp; no one faltered. I did find the scene in which the girls appear to indulge in an orgy of drink and drugs slightly confusing, but this was the only issue is what was otherwise a crisp, engaging production.

*Pool (No Water)* is at theSpace@Niddry Street at 13.05 every day until 10<sup>th</sup> August. Tickets [here](#).