

HEAD PREVIEW/REVIEWS – Edinburgh Festival Fringe, August 2004

Copyright 2004 The List Magazine

The List

5th – 12th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head & Phaedra's Love

BYLINE: Acclaimed young company from Fringe 2003 returns with more Sarah Kane and a new play.

BODY:

Fail Better returns to the Fringe with two shows, following its highly acclaimed and sell-out production of Sarah Kane's *Crave* in 2002. *Phaedra's Love*, also by Kane, is a brooding family tragedy drawing on classical Greek myth, and centering on one woman's obsession with her stepson. The second production is *Head*, a new play by Fail Better's associate artist Zoë Simon. It's a ferocious and emotive love story set in a filthy London housing estate, exploring the unusual places in which love can thrive.

Director Jonathan Heron comments: 'We felt it was logical to follow our previous Kane play with another and I think that there are definite parallels running through our work.'

'I've always been very influenced by Beckett, as was Kane, as is Zoë, another young, female playwright who wrote *Head*. Thematically and stylistically, *Head* shares elements that also concerned Kane – brutality and love, theatre in relation to depression – so there are definitely real connections between the work of the company.'

(Gareth Davies)

Head: Underbelly 5-29 Aug (not 16), 6:15pm; Phaedra's Love: Underbelly, Thu 5-Sun 29 Aug (not 16), £8.50-£7.50 (£7.50-£6.50) 9pm.

Copyright 2004 The List Magazine

The List

12th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head

BYLINE: Sterile contemporary love story **

BODY:

Zoë Simon's play is a tale of love amid the scumheaps of a London housing estate, with a sidelines take on the impact of language on everyday lives. It's a dark and murky story which doesn't quite have the clarity of writing it needs to make any real impact on its audience.

It looks and feels slightly too much like a student production – the set is scrappy and the performance area is too restrictive to allow for an effective/interesting use of space. Cold, without much humour or characters rounded enough to empathise with, Head is too sterile for any real dramatic effect.

(Gareth Davies)

Underbelly, 0870 745 3083, until 29 Aug (not 16), 4:15pm, £7.50-£8.50 (£6.50-£7.50).

Copyright 2004 edinburghguide.com

edinburghguide.com

18th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head by Zoë Simon

BODY:

Drams #####

Venue Underbelly (Venue 61)

Address Cowgate/Victoria Street

Reviewer Ritchie Smith

Let me quote from this play, "Ah. Hurts. Didn't meant to. Shouldn't". But they did... This play is a low-octane Sarah Kane, a teenage rant where... Everyone! Speaks! One-word! Sentences! And goes by street names like 'Head' and 'Urchin'. Anyway, the mentally disturbed Head is her father's 'butterfly' and a child-abuse victim. The setting is the clichéd urban dystopia of 'the estates', where many have been killed by 'the filth' (i.e. police) in the constant riots.

The stage is piled with black bin-bags and obscurely-motivated characters wander on and off stage shouting "Murdering bitch Thatcher, out out out!" Okay, I'm lying about that last bit, but that's how old and tired this play seems. And the direction! Characters scrabbling about on the floor, where only the front row can possibly see... I don't want to be unkind, but whoever let this apprentice exercise go on was doing nobody any favours – especially as author Zoë Simon, who also plays Head, is clearly an actress of passion and ability.

©Ritchie smith 14 August 2004 – Published on Edinburghguide.com

Runs to 29 August (not 16th) at 6.15pm

Company – Fail Better Productions

Copyright 2004 3weeks

3weeks

19th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head by Zoë Simon

BYLINE: Fail Better Productions

BODY:

A devastating, abstract piece of cruelty, this show explores the themes of social and emotional deprivation, self-harm and violence, as well as other 'dark' material. It's very good but be warned that it is harrowing and, at times, disturbing as three very strong performers take full command of the well-crafted dialogue. The design of the towers created out of rubbish sack and newspaper, contextualises the setting within a derelict inner city landscape, but I wonder whether they're not a little superfluous, creating distraction from the most poignant moments and the bleak finale. It steers perilously close to self-indulgence in places but it does stay on the right side of being relevant and powerful. [jb]

Underbelly, 5-29 Aug (not 16), 6:15pm (7:15pm), prices vary, fpp 154

twrating: 4/5

Copyright 2004 The Stage

The Stage

19th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head by Zoë Simon

BODY:

Smirnoff Underbelly

August 5-15, 17-29

Author: Zoë Simon

Director: Jonathan Heron

Producer: Fail Better Productions

Cast: Zoë Simon, Matthew Landers, Gary Abrahams

Running Time: 1hr

An impressive set featuring a pyramid of discarded bin-bags and city detritus and two representations of towerblocks made from, again, bin-bags and ripped up newspaper, instantly draw the audience into Zoë Simon's highly stylized vision of the despair and insular nature of life on a sump estate.

Two youngsters, Head (Simon) and Matthew Lander's Urchin, are drawn together amidst the degradation, attracted to one another by their idiosyncratic use of language and Head's ability to express the despair Urchin feels – in one way or another.

Simon's words blossom from the desperate set like tomato plants growing from a sewage silo. This is a wonderfully poetic script with the words entwined around meaning, drawing comparison with Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*.

So, well written by Simon, but also powerfully acted – Head's obscure view of the world not only depicted through the speech and the conceptual set but also through her vulnerable, brittle performance.

Landers, in his first professional role, matches Simon step for step – just as his character must do, picking up on Head's nuances but falling a little behind in his

understanding. His is an impressive debut. Abrahams has the hard task of playing slightly straighter man to this pair and suffers for it.

Overall, Simon is showing the promise of being an outstanding theatrical player.

Jeremy Austin

Copyright 2004 Edinburgh Evening News

Edinburgh Evening News

23rd August 2004

HEADLINE: Clever drama touches upon everyday strife

BYLINE: Head. Underbelly ***

BODY:

"Who are you when the night comes?" Zoë Simon's new play, *Head*, touches upon the agonies of the everyday life of a disadvantaged and increasingly dispossessed youth.

A shocking indictment of society's marginalisation of those from the wrong side of the tracks, this piece explores the suppression of individualism against a backdrop of alcoholism, drugs and mental illness.

Desperate

As our two protagonists experience the raw burgeoning of love against the bleak urban wasteland of a south London housing estate they dream of escaping the brutal realities of their lives.

A desperate, emotionally charged play, *Head* displays a depth and tenderness in contrast to the grim landscape in which it is set.

The intense performances from Simon herself as *Head* and Matthew Landers as *Urchin* provoke compassion for an element of society which the majority of us are guilty of trying to ignore.

Influenced by Beckett and the Greek tragedies, Simon's writing is both complex and insightful.

Her assertion that individuals are at one with themselves through love and understanding is as old as the ages, but will always be crucial while humans walk the earth.

Simon is obviously a technically-gifted individual both as an actor and writer and by virtue of being the writer she has a true grasp of her material. This gives the play an edge which carries the audience through a brisk hour.

A character-driven narrative only adds to the vigour of the performances. Direction and lighting are excellent, well balanced and instrumental in creating a dramatic tour de force.

Run ends August 29

Lynn Armstrong

Copyright 2004 Reviewsgate.com

Reviewsgate.com

25th August 2004

HEADLINE: All well done, but without the spark to make it stand out in a well-worn field (or alley)

BODY:

Head
By Zoë Simon

Smirnoff underbelly (Big Belly)
To 29 August 2004
Mon-Sun 6.15pm
Runs 1hr No interval

TICKETS: 0870 7453083
Review Timothy Ramsden 22August

One purpose Edinburgh's Fringe serves is to give young writers, directors and actors an opportunity to flex their muscles where there's a potential audience and critical attention, but not the individually spotlighted exposure of some theatre premieres.

Fail Better Productions, which has its roots at Warwick University (although the cast have trained elsewhere), sum up their production in their name. It could be put more positively as 'promising'; a lot of what limits it is not in itself problematic.

Zoë Simon has a good way with the kind of sawn-off dialogue used to express dispossession for the last 30 years of English Theatre. She has some memorable images in her script; the cul-de-sac rubbish heaps among which her two central characters live have a glittering edge that indicates her characters have not given up on life.

And there's a determined roughness – Head giving birth down among the dirt-sacks, with fears of infection – that is no more romanticized squalor than that in many a previous play at prestigious theatres.

Simon's Head is herself a scrawny creature surviving on street scraps of pizza and cola. And Simon, giving her girl a small-voiced plangency and aggression, is as good an actress as writer. Her main companion, Matthew Lander's Urchin, is also technically well acted, but looks far too healthy and composed to be another creature of the cul-de-sac.

Jonathan Heron's production could benefit from more focusing of main points; it tends to rush past at a generally uniform rate. But it's punchy and uses its limited space well.

This isn't easy-viewing, light-touch theatre. But it could impress anyone coming without a history of previous such 'dispossessed-drama'. Who knows, in 20 years time one of 2004's newborn babies might be fuming at a middle aged critic reviewing their streetwise first play with a 'very good, but we saw it years ago in Zoë Simon's Head'.

Head: Zoë Simon
Urchin: Matthew Landers
PH: Gary Abrahams

Voice of Head's Father: Peter Craze

Director/Dramaturg: Jonathan Heron
Designer: Nomi Everall

Copyright 2004 Metro

Metro

26th August 2004

HEADLINE: THEATRE REVIEW

BYLINE: Head ***

BODY:

Set in a depressed South London council estate Zoë Simon's powerful and poetic play is a destructive love story about two doomed youths struggling to overcome their inner demons.

Head, brilliantly played by Simon, is a deeply disturbed teenager who falls for Urchin, a young homeless man, unable to let go of his past. The pair strike up a relationship which they consummate among the filth of a rubbish tip. But their twisted romance is cut short when a well-meaning doctor convinces Urchin to help him commit Head to a mental institution.

The dark spectre of Sarah Kane looms imposingly over Simon's writing, as themes of mental illness, love and brutality are explored through vivid and violent imagery. But while her creative debt is evident, Simon's rich and emotive script – including such lines as 'you put a plaster on my knee and kick me in the head' – prove she is far more than a mere imitator.

Although sometimes confusing, the explosively delivered dialogue is never less than compelling.

Nomi Everall's set fashioned out of bin-liners and rubbish evokes the nihilistic world of the estate and the harsh industrial soundtrack further adds to the atmosphere of desolation and destruction. This is a brave and bold production with gutsy performances all round and it marks out Simon as a writer to watch.

Chris Collett

Until Sun, Smirnoff Underbelly (V61), Cowgate, 18:15 to 19:15, £7.50 and £8.50, £6.50 and £7.50 concs. Tel: 0870 7453083. www.failbetter.co.uk

Copyright 2004 theatreguidelondon.com

Theatreguidelondon.com

26th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head. Underbelly

BODY:

Zoë Simon's play attempts with more success than you might expect to get into the heads of the thoroughly damaged feral kids of an inner city slum that has lost almost all connection with the civilized world. A boy and girl living rough in the ruins of an abandoned estate have each retreated into private languages and private mental states so they have to work hard to connect with each other, much less the social worker from outside who tries to help them. The result is something like a love story, something like a docudrama, something like a small-scale tragedy of opportunities missed or never really there. The play is weakened a bit by having the characters back stories, as we gradually learn them, turn out somewhat clichéd, and by the role and motivations of the outsider remaining murky, but its picture of young lives irretrievably lost can't help but be moving. Gerald Berkowitz

Copyright 2004 The Scotsman

The Scotsman

28th August 2004

HEADLINE: THEATRE. HEAD ***

BYLINE: SMIRNOFF UNDERBELLY (Venue 61)

BODY:

Following their success on the Fringe in 2002 with a production of Sarah Kane's *Crave*, this young theatre company returns with a new play by associate artist Zoë Simon. *Head* is a jagged difficult story of adolescent love and how damaged young people become trapped in a cycle of destruction.

Head meets *Urchin* at the "scum heap" where both are hiding out in a sink estate in a never-explained, futuristic London. *Head* self-harms and dreads being carted off to the loony bin. Her father is an alcoholic. *Urchin* believes in some kind of political solution. Amid the waste of their society, they embark on a touching but ultimately destructive affair.

Head recalls Sarah Kane in its heightened poetic language and its ability to draw moments of beauty from the jaws of awfulness. The performers work hard, particularly Simon herself in the title role, and there is a haunting rubbish heap set.

But the play lacks the clarity that would invite us to understand the characters, their motives and society. Though we are sometimes moved, we spend too much of this play feeling confused.

Susan Mansfield

Until tomorrow. Today 6:15pm

Copyright 2004 culturewars.org.uk

www.culturewars.org.uk

HEADLINE: Head. Smirnoff Underbelly

BYLINE: David Bowden

BODY:

'Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat our tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.'
Gustave Flaubert

Language is, inevitably, the life-blood of drama: it is often the writer's only tool for expressing the thoughts, actions and motives of their characters, and hence the 'message' of the production. Perhaps due to the theatre being seen (inappropriately) as a stepping-stone to other ambitions these days, there have been many Fringe productions by youthful companies that have at times sought to deny language its proper place on the stage - trying to use visual images, music and other cinematic stylings to connect with the audience on familiar media terms, rather than on purely theatrical ones.

Samuel Beckett's *Not I* and Zoë Simon's *Head* stand out in this climate. Language is the crux of these pieces, but in both cases it becomes a weapon against the spectator - confusing, concealing and twist meaning, and inhibiting simple analysis. We are left straining to find a sense of coherence amidst the broken syntax, garbled phrases and dangerously thrown words.

Not I is a one-woman, twenty minute monologue. The production is stripped down to its very bare bones - all we are permitted to see of the actress is her mouth; one must see what can be taken from only the violent movements of her lips, tongue and larynx; and of course those words. Although it is only twenty minutes long there seems to be enough words for twice that length - no silences or breaks are allowed as an old woman ('sixty....nearly seventy!') finally finds her voice in fast-paced stream-of-consciousness.

In these tortured, enigmatic ramblings Beckett allows us an entry-point into the narrative only through careful repetition and a deft understanding of structure - only because he has such control over his words can he abuse them in such a way. Looking for meaning in Beckett is always a very dangerous task, but the breathless

performance of Pauline Goldsmith leaves the audience reeling and, frankly, too stunned to be able to.

Zoë Simon attempts something similar in her new play *Head*. It is a curious play set in an unspecified, possibly futuristic dystopia. Simon herself takes on the role of *Head*, a mentally disturbed girl who falls in love with the kindly *Urchin*. The dialogue recalls the butchered English of *A Clockwork Orange* as the characters attempt to defy the sinister machinations of a well-spoken social worker and the creeping hand of mental illness.

The ethereal, dreamlike atmosphere is deeply unnerving and unsettling - the touching romance (that finally ends in bloodbath) between *Head* and *Urchin* is an interesting juxtaposition. The overall feeling is that of a crooked fairytale - grown-ups are to be feared, and murder can be an act of love. As an externalisation of a troubled inner psyche it is brimming with potential, and Fail Better Productions should be congratulated for this baffling, but endlessly engaging performance: a real Fringe find.

Maybe Flaubert was right about the limitations of language, but he was not quite imaginative enough. Sometimes language can be used to force sympathy from the angels; but it can also be used to confuse and mock them, all the same.

With thanks to Stuart Simpson for his advice on *Not I*.
