

Best Fringe Show 2007

Tamara Gausi

Time Out London

19/12/08

DIARY OF A MADMAN (after Gogol)

The Rosemary Branch Theatre, London

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HEADLINE: Diary of a Madman

BYLINE: **** Rosemary Branch Theatre Fringe

BODY:

Proclaimed by the British Medical Journal as one of the first, and most explicit portraits of schizophrenia in literature, 'Diary of a Madman' isn't just an extraordinary sketch of one man's insanity. Written in 1834, Nikolai Gogol's dark, comedic short is also a pithy description of the gnawing tedium of life six links from the bottom of the administrative food chain. And it's made painfully familiar in Fail Better's accomplished one-man performance.

Through a series of diary entries written over the course of a year, it tells the story of Axenty Ivanovich (played by an enchanting Christopher Tester) a class obsessed middle-ranking civil servant in Tsarist Russia whose ascent to imagined greatness coincides with his descent into madness. The play begins with humorous pedantry – it takes several minutes of obsessive tidying, rigorous clothes-folding and pencil-over-blank-page-hovering before Ivanovich utters his first words. But the laughter soon gives way to something more sinister. An unrequited crush on his superior's daughter seems to trigger a latent psychosis, culminating in a series of disturbing, albeit imagined events (the murder of a talking dog that ruminates on his desperate position, his discovery that he's actually the King of Spain) before he is committed to an asylum.

Under Jonathan Heron's terse direction Tester (who adapted the text for stage with Heron) offers an absorbing performance in this Beckettian drama, even if he doesn't appear as comfortable in despair as he is in comedy and frantic derangement. Aided by Dave Thwaites' clever lighting design, Nomi Everall's cut-away bedroom set perfectly captures the claustrophobic mania that envelopes the affecting narrative, a reminder that madness sits dangerously close to us all.

Tamara Gausi

A few weeks later, Tamara sent our Director the following e-mail:

Hello Jonathan

I hope this email finds you well. About a month ago I reviewed your show and gave it four stars. I have been thinking about it ever since and if I were possible to turn back the clock, I would have given it five stars. There is not a lot I can do about it now, but I thought I ought to let you know.

It was a really great piece of theatre - refreshing, clever and affecting - that stayed with me long after the show. And having seen All About My Mother later the same week (which I hated), it made me appreciate what you guys managed to do with probably 1/100th of the budget and just one cast member. One of the problems with reviewing is you quickly have to pass a judgement that is permanent, while feelings often change or develop. Unfortunately that is the

nature of the job (until we start moving more towards online journalism which will allow for updates and more feedback) but this is the first time I ever felt that I should do this.

I really wish you all the best of luck for the future and I hope to see more of your work. You guys are a very talented team.

Best wishes,

Tamara

It is important to note that Tamara has kindly agreed to let us share this e-mail with you and it is not a published opinion or review from Time Out London.

However, in Time Out's final edition of the year we were named 'Best Fringe Show of 2007' by Tamara Gausi.

ON-LINE AUDIENCE FEEDBACK:

We were stunned and moved by this production from a truly dedicated theatre company who deserve wider recognition.

Lizzy A - Posted on Time Out London online - Sep 11 2007

Fantastic show! So much more than your average 'above the pub theatre'. Truly worth watching for a total dramatic experience.

Joel - Posted on Time Out London online - Sep 05 2007 17

An amazing piece of theatre- 'Diary of a Madman' is both captivating and devastating to watch, the theatre creates an all-encompassing atmosphere that carries you along with the protagonists journey. The design is beautiful and adds to the mood of the play. Performed with true emotion, it makes you both laugh and cry, and is definitely the best piece of fringe theatre I've seen. A fantastic achievement, which I highly recommend you go and see.

It's a travesty that Time Out has not reviewed this yet!!

Abi - Posted on Time Out London online - Sep 03 2007

******* Both funny and gut-wrenching in its finale, this production is a triumph. Fans of Beckett will particularly appreciate the first half. An original music score adds weight.**

David Grant Tester, Marlow, UK – Posted on thisislondon.co.uk

FROM AUDIENCE COMMENTS BOOK:

I loved the show. The performance, the direction, the set and design were wonderful. I believed every moment of the journey: truthful, pure and intense. Very interesting piece of theatre - we're all a bit mad at some stage of life...

A.C.

The show moved me to tears and laughter. I loved all the quirky maddening elements. I was totally engaged. Well done Chris and team.

S.M.

I really enjoyed the show! You were great and the intensity of the story and the character kept me captivated throughout. A very sad and touching story that really made me giggle at times too. Congratulations.

J.D.

Original, innovative, courageous, moving, hilarious... what a hidden gem! Best 'fringe' I've seen in a very long time. All parts of this equally multi-talented company collaborate fantastically well together. I'm coming back again before they hit the big time and are able to charge four times the price. All the best for now and in the future.

S.B.

From the moment you see the wonderfully evocative and ingenious set, you know this is going to be several rungs up from your average one man adapted classic - and it SO is! Excellent direction, very skillfully acted and brilliant soundtrack. You will love this piece of pure theatre.

J.P.

An enthralling evening and a roller-coaster of emotions. Acting, design, direction and lighting superb. Who needs the West End?!

L.L.

Everyone - and by that I mean EVERYONE, should see this production. Beautifully performed and directed with an impeccable eye for detail. If you read this comment, don't think twice: buy a ticket immediately!

J.B.

A captivating production. Sharp, thoughtful and suddenly ferocious, it has you entranced all the way through. Beautiful monologue at the end, and a fantastic set to boot. A must see masterpiece!

R.S.

Very inventive and intelligent - great performance.

D.D.

A compelling and engrossing piece of theatre. Beautifully designed and emotionally performed, it captivates both joy and despair and carries you along on the journey of self destruction. Very moving and enjoyable, and definitely recommended!

A.E.

Well done, excellent production and brilliantly acted. Will recommend to all I know.

S.C.

Terrific production - praise all round! Lighting, sound effects, direction - all superb!

M.T.

I thought it was terrific too - having seen Chris' first appearance on stage at the age of about 12!

R.D.

Wow: a fantastic piece of theatre. It took me straight back to my days as a student on my psychiatry attachment. Seriously: hugely realistic portrayal of psychosis from my point of view. Sorry I can't make any knowledgeable criticism on the staging/production side of things, but even I could see the fantastic acting/lighting/scenery/direction bringing the piece to life. Look forward to more Fail Better Productions.

T.T.

Well done all! A deeply moving portrayal by the actor - funny, touching and intense. Great production values throughout -set was perfect and well thought!

J.K.

A very interesting piece of theatre – well written, well designed, well acted and well directed. A very realistic emotional journey.

R.P.

Thanks you for a very thought-provoking piece of theatre. It built very well to what I found a very moving climax. Lovely design and clear, well thought out direction.

A.M.

A really intense, magnetic production. I enjoyed it very much. Davenant's loss is theatre's gain.

R.B.

A really powerful performance – it's really impressive that one person and one set can hold the audience's attention! Thank you for a great evening!

K.

A fabulous production. Thought-provoking and providing insight into mental health.

T.Y.

What a wonderful performance. Loved it! Thanks for getting us out of the pub!

A.M.

Incredibly intense portrait of mental health. Great set and direction – all very atmospheric.

J.E.

I was pleasantly surprised at how professional the production was.

P.E.

No date, no month . . . passion of a madman.

V.K.

Had a fantastic time, you did great!

B.U.

Great! The Gogol well developed since 'work-in-progress' showing at Pegasus.

C.E.

Truly stunning, another great one for Fail Better!

E.A.

A wonderful experience – full of studied observation and gravitas and thank-our-lucky-stars-humour.

P.H.

Stunning. Once again, Fail Better has created a work of tortured brilliance. Congratulations.

S.P.

Great performance, great production, great direction and great entertainment. A wonderful evening.

J.S.

A very impressive performance – demanding, energetic and professional. Fail Better has demonstrated again the quality of acting and direction which it can produce, again and again.

S.W.

A very memorable piece, love the use of the lamp.

N.Z.

Brilliant, truly brilliant. My favourite moment is the pause after writing the MAD of MADRID.

Anon - OYT

It was just amazing, well done. Ps. The chairs were nailed to the floor for some reason.

Anon - OYT

Fantabulous, amazing, great. Thanks so much for a brill show. Would see it again and again.

R.

What a creative and amazing play – well done.

Anon - OYT

Sheer brilliance with a cocktail of emotions, very inspirational! Thank you so much!

B.

Absolutely superb – really distinguished acting covering a whole spectrum of thought and feeling.

Anon

A really excellent play. By turns amusing and darkly disturbing! Superb!

S.

Thoroughly enjoyed my first ever play.

Anon

It's gone from very good to brilliant – congrats to the whole company.

D.T.

A great comeback for Fail Better. Awesome work all round.

A.

You two – what hard work you put in! Really great and affecting. Great choice of material. Huge congratulations.

S.P.

An amazing show. I hope to see more stuff soon.

Anon

Congratulations, you have created a stunning piece of theatre. Really really impressed. Felt like I held my breath from start to finish. Amazing work.

H.

Amazing attention to detail and brilliant that you could laugh at madness! Well done.

A.H.

A fantastic experience. Excellent acting, direction and design. Look forward to the next production.

M.

A brilliant actor and an amazing director.

G & A.D.

Really well done, so impressive.

F.

Its nice and reassuring to know there is somebody else out there who feels the same way! Brilliantly acted. Good timing of clock and desk sync.

L.

Captured the mood of the story perfectly. Thanks.

J.

Total respect. Wonderful. Thank you.

L & V & B

Not a moment of distraction, absolutely concentrated (in every sense).

S.

Oh yes, what fantastic attention to detail and capturing so much of what I love about life. Set, performance, light and wonderful words and silence – thanks!

J.H.

Obviously amazing talented, well done, proud you're an ex-Warwicker!

Z.

Deeply unsettling – but that's a good think. Had moments of humour too. Held it all. I really enjoyed it.

M.

A complete piece – set, lights, excellent score, accomplished acting and direction with well rehearsed timing. I felt guilty for laughing but also complicit in his downfall. Will take some time to digest it all. Very Gogol. Very Heron. Very Beckett. Look forward to the next one!

L.L.

I'll just echo L's comments I think! It was a superb amalgam of Beckett's style and your unique direction; Lepage popped into my head too, considering the one man casting and that impeccable technical timing, the whole production was a real treat! Loved it. Really looking forward to the next one!

M.L.

Thank you, really enjoyed it.

D.

Great performance – adaptation, set, lighting, music and acting worked well together brilliantly to create a convincing piece of art. Thank you so much for a very enjoyable theatre experience!

K.

Superb! Perfectly presented and performed. An extraordinary experience – I feel shaken and stirred.

J.

Performed and produced with the usual prowess and originality we have come to expect from Fail Better Productions.

J.J.

Well done everybody – a brilliant production. Very best wishes for the future of Fail Better Productions.

J & R

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