

Fencing for Losers

By Rob Johnston
Ignition Stage
Manchester Metropolitan University Didsbury Campus Theatre

Review by Andrew Edwards (British Theatre Guide 2009)

This two hander shows what happens when a rather repressed but professional young woman meets an angry young man from Manchester. Susan has advertised a free fencing evening class and Danny has turned up. He is her only pupil and a homeless drug addict. He dreams of bettering himself, perhaps winning a medal, and has already attended classes in many other subjects. They lock horns and a power battle develops with plenty of verbal and physical fencing along the way. We discover Susan's secret which explains why she offered the class for free. By the end of the piece, after an exploration of the worlds and dreams of the two main characters, the roles are reversed.

This is a powerful short piece of theatre. The set is very sparse and each scene is deftly sketched with the same basic wooden chair and class room type table. The many empty product boxes fulfil a less symbolic role as the play unfolds. The lighting also cleverly implies different locations.

The tension between Susan and Danny is very well maintained by the two performers over the 80 minutes. You are never quite sure just how intimate they are going to become after their initial confrontation. Szilvi Naray-Davey is Hungarian born and trained at the Lee Strasburg Theatre Institute most famous for its " method " acting approach. She ably showed us Susan's journey from prim and proper to more open minded. She also revealed her own struggle to accept a major character flaw. Phil Briggs has a considerable stage presence and veered very skilfully between the playful and the violent. His raw energy drives a fair amount of the action. He conveyed a strong sense of menace in his baiting of Susan. This production marks his professional debut.

The dialogue is also very well constructed. There is some lovely repartee such as when Danny says that he doesn't believe in paranoia as the voices tell him not to or when Susan agrees that the class could be called fencing for losers as the college loves special needs. Both evoked considerable mirth from the packed house at the intimate Didsbury campus theatre. Local writer Rob Johnston is no stranger to small theatre spaces having cut his teeth at Studio Salford and the local 24:7 Theatre Festival.

The Director Richard Sinnott has wrung every ounce of humour and conflict from the play and coached impressive performances from the two actors. The fencing is also very exciting. It evoked the memory of Diana Rigg from the television series *The Avengers*. It is worth noting that Szilvi Naray-Davey is a former International fencer. The only minor irritation for this reviewer was that the adjacent bank of seating was not very safe and tended to collapse at the slightest touch.