

Review of [Fencing for Losers](#)



"Crossed swords and well-chosen words."
by [Ed Barrett](#) for remotegoat on 31/01/10

The first thing that impresses about *Fencing for Losers* is the set: stacks of brown paper-wrapped boxes, with fragmented portraits of the protagonists, hint at designer Ian Scullion's architectural qualifications and give a solid grounding to the action. The rest of the set is minimal, giving little more than a blank canvas against which Phil Briggs and Szilvi Narey-Davey bring their characters to life with beguiling ease.

In Mr Briggs' hands, Danny is far more than a cardboard cut out of a Mancunian drug-addict, and shows signs of the mixed loyalties and emotionally arrested development that leads him to require insulation from the real world. Ms Narey-Davey is equally convincing as Susan, the fencing coach whose apparent philanthropy disguises ulterior motives. Rob Johnston's skills as a writer are such that there was never any danger of the characters being two-dimensional; enhanced with acting of depth and grace, *and the piece takes flight*.

The development of the relationship between the two is the real key to the play. Johnston nimbly avoids the twin traps of having Danny and Susan develop a relationship merely because the writer wants them to, or presenting us with an odd couple thrown together purely so we can see sparks fly. Instead, we see two people with their own reasons for being in this situation, so the friction we see has real meaning.

Other aspects of the production are just as impressive. As a keen fencer myself, I often find myself disappointed by the lack of skill in evidence when someone picks up a sword on stage - even in some high-profile productions. That is not the case here - Ms Narey-Davey clearly knows her forte from her foible, and it is (I imagine) thanks to her coaching that Danny's improvement is also believable.

The musical choices are quirky but well made, and intertwined with the onstage action, so helping the piece chug along nicely. Director Richard Sinnott orchestrates changes of pace, passage of time, and shifts in mood with an admirable facility.

A few aspects of the production are less convincing. The labels hanging from various items of costume had an obvious symbolism, but add little to the play overall. The intermittent beeping heard over the P.A. occasionally had meaning - a fencing hit here, a shop alarm there - but was otherwise so random I'm still unsure whether it was actually just a technical glitch. Most

disorientating was a sudden change to a much more stylised mode of story telling that took a few moments to register as a dream sequence. I found myself thinking it might have been more palatable had we been prepared for the shift; but must admit the scene's impact was at least partly due to it's unexpected arrival.

In fact, these slight criticisms, such as they are, are undoubtedly due to the boldness and ambition that make the piece as a whole work so well. It is a credit to all involved that the uncomfortable seating took little away from my enjoyment of the performance.