

## Chatroom – A Review – Friday November 6<sup>th</sup> 2020

Live theatre! Oh the thrill of it – the shared space across the darkness – the strident lights – kaleidoscope of colours – the soundscapes reverberating around us – and six distinctive voices projected across the space.

Thank you – thank you so much, Canford School – for daring this production of Chatroom by Enda Walsh.

After months of live-streamed, 'Zoomed' and video-recorded shows in the lockdown season of 2020, words cannot fully express just how this experience has reignited the powerful engagement of mind, body and spirit in the full sensory experience that is – live performance!

Of course, the irony is not lost on us that we are watching a play in which the characters are communicating entirely in the virtual world of internet chatrooms; and which calls for socially distanced performances – as is appropriate for our times; just as we are seated in a socially distanced audience setting.

Six diverse teenage characters are brought to life for us by six teenage actors – potentially their counterparts – to share with us the confusions, challenges and anxieties that come with the territory of transitioning from child to young adult. This piece is terrifically demanding for the actors – by turns, each having a variety of lengthy monologues that punctuate the quick-fire exchanges between them; and the whole 'symphony' depending on the sensitive ensemble playing that is always aware of the effective nuances of variations in pace.

And this sextet do not disappoint:

In the red corner is the power-player William, played with convincing attack by **Petrus**, sparring with Eva, played by **Chloe**, who glowers as she glows in her fiery orange room, stoking the fires of manipulative power and feeding the energies of the accompanying rhetoric and word-play.

By contrast, in the pink room is Emily, played by **Varya**, who gives us a composed and convincing performance of quietly troubling anxiety; while in the blue room **Ollie** gives us a highly sensitive interpretation of the confused and frustrated Jack, who realises that the cyberbullying and power-play going on in this chatroom is a negative force, but is however at a loss as to how to counter it.

We're kept waiting for Laura in the green corner, who has the difficult job of observing and listening in the dark throughout large parts of the 'action' – thoughtfully and sensitively played by **Olivia** as she provides the voice of calm and quietly positive hope and support.

And then there is the ominous empty white chair – building our curiosity, as the character of Jim arrives later on, when **Johannes** gives us an intelligent portrayal of a depressed young man reaching out for understanding and compassion from fellow 'chatterers'. With an intensity of focus, he takes us with him on his journey back to 'reclaim his childhood' from the grips of the trauma he suffered as a six-year-old; and delivers a memorable climactic sequence, as he plays out his cowboy fantasy-frenzy in McDonald's. I'll never be able to look at my office chair again without seeing the image of a young cowboy using it to ride a horse!

The tension that builds through the twists and turns of the relationships amongst the six is well orchestrated and sustained. This is ably supported by an abstract set, designed and constructed by **Kevin Wilkins**, assisted by **Jonathen Ledger** and **Callum Bruce**, that emphasises isolation and separate identities; and also by the technical wizardry of light and sound created by **Ed** and **Sophia** respectively; enhancing the sensory experience with video projections, dramatic light shows, soundscapes of electronica and pertinent pop songs; and heightening moments of tension, conflict, relief and resolution.

The whole package is powerfully directed with the clarity of '20/20 vision' by **Rikki Jackson**, whose conjurer's magic makes for a memorable evening at the theatre in this unforgettable year of 2020.

Who needs a show-stopping musical, when this kind of immersive, mixed-media, multi-sensory experience can be so uplifting? I just wanted to throw off my mask and rush down from the gallery and give them all a big hug – but of course, I couldn't.

Carry on, Canford. The shows must go on!

Jane Skellett – 7/8 November 2020