



[Asylum of Grace](#) by Neil Ely

Directed by Lloyd Eyre-Morgan, at [Three Minute Theatre](#)

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) December 2012

[Asylum of Grace](#) is a psychological drama set in the early 1980s, where free spirited Amber (**Sian Hill**

) from Manchester becomes pregnant after copping off with local lad Sean (

Joseph Michael Watts

) whilst she was working as a waitress in Eastbourne for the summer season. Amber is Catholic so rules out abortion as a viable solution to her predicament, so Sean's ever present and controlling mum Ruth (

Janet Bamford

) steps up to extend her influence over her wayward son by paying for the ill-fated couple to get married. To complicate matters further, the new lodger in a room downstairs from Amber and Sean's in Ruth's house, Michael (

Rob Ward

) helps keep the free spirit of independence alive in Amber. This roller coaster of emotional tension is set for a bumpy ride.

Discussing **Asylum of Grace** with Neil Ely and Lloyd Eyre-Morgan before rehearsals began, it was clear that they wanted to see the psychological aspects of interpersonal relationships explored, including the way in which **controlling behaviour** should be seen as abuse. When Neil said that he'd broken off from writing a comedy to get this play written as it was weighing on his mind and just had to write it. Although there are some aspects of the play that may be a little cathartic and allowed him to reflect on his own previous relationships, I think the play is more than personal and chimes with wider discussions in politics. The ironically named

Liberal

side of the government coalition is bringing forth an extension to the interpretation of the term **abuse**

to include such things as

controlling behaviour

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The professional instigators of changes in the law, to reflect how they've been operating for a while, will see **Asylum of Grace** as highlighting what they've been saying about abuse for a while. Indeed, the Manchester based charity [Independent](#)

[Choices](#), were happy to be associated with the play, receiving £1 from each ticket sold and spoke in the interval to applaud how it exposed the impact of controlling behaviour in domestic abuse against women, often instigated when women are pregnant. The play is also going to perform on March 8th as part of international women's week.

Asylum of Grace presents a complex view of the inter-personal relations that don't easily lend themselves legalistic views of right and wrong by third parties. Yes, Sean fits the popular view of the female abusing man - working class fella who treats women as objects to be bedded before moving on to the next, and to tick some extra boxes he's a football fan who drinks beer. Neil though scripted Sean as quite a likeable character, a charmer, and when casting the actor with Lloyd, they selected **Joseph Michael Watts** who does a brilliant job of warming the audience to him in the equally charming

Three Minute Theatre

, and ensuring that the waters are muddied a little.

Asylum of Grace is gratifyingly multi-layered, subtle and dynamic in the way characters develop and change. Amber for example, played by **Sian Hill** with delightful

sophistication, introduces herself as a feisty and sassy young woman independent enough to be working away from her home city of Manchester as a waitress in Eastbourne. She teasingly taunts, though with the most serious underpinning for the story as a whole, Sean as something of a mummy's boy for still living at home in his mum's house, though he retorts that it's his own place as he's a lodger with his own flat. Sean's dominant mum Ruth, played with scarey determination by

Janet Bamford

is far from just being the landlady - she's in and out of the flat and the lives of those who spend anytime there with impunity.

The initially feisty and spirited Amber starts to have her wings clipped when she returns to tell Sean that she's pregnant after their brief liaison, only to find him liaising with another young woman. Right on cue, Ruth appears to take control of the situation her son has got himself into, *helping*

him to decide on their next steps. Ruth, widowed a few years earlier, faced with Amber's determination to have the baby because of her Catholic religious beliefs, pays for the wedding with the expectation of them continuing to live in her house so that she can ensure Sean and the baby are looked after by her. Amber reluctantly agrees and with her options narrowing, we're introduced to the young man Sean should be - the cosmopolitan and well travelled Michael, compellingly played by

Rob Ward

. Michael keeps her spirit alive and restores her faith that things would be ok.



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