



JB Shorts 12 presented by Reallife Theatre Company

Reviewed by Paul Thompson October 2014

In the dingy, urban chic of a Princess Street hostelry, the polished diamond of Manchester's fringe theatre scene – JB Shorts – is back in its twelfth incarnation. Joshua Brooks gives up its basement to fire short, theatrical creations of TV writers like tennis balls from a machine at sell-out crowds.

The evening's first course is a serving of horror-themed farce, as **Peter Kerry's *Mr Normal*** sets up two couples of adjacent generation in lock down as zombies creep nearer. It's a '***what would you do if you had an hour to live***

' scenario, with a subtlety roughly akin to a hard kick in the groin. Once the twist is revealed, I'm not entirely sure whom I'm supposed to be rooting for. But maybe that's not the point.

It started with a clear statement of zany intent – like so many of these fringe playlets it is keen to tickle the audience – and goes all out to maintain that energy tirelessly. Before long, it descends into outright silliness shooting for cheap laughs, as scantily-clad characters cavort in front of us before moaning with orgasmic pleasure off-stage – noises misinterpreted and ignored by fictitious spouses so deep in denial, there are sometimes more eyebrows raised than laughs.

Hit and miss as it emphatically is, it will never cause anyone to look at their watch. There are enough guffaws to see it through. The legend that is serial panto dame and Greater Manchester board-treading stalwart **Eric Potts** is at hand to smooth over shortcomings with his signature uber-confidence. At one point, we double over with mirth as he whispers a few synonyms. There's nothing inherently funny about these words. The man simply has what it takes.

A change of pace follows with a thought-provoking study of a power relationship in **Jane McNulty**

's **A**

Hairline Crack

, deftly realised by

Paul Blinkhorn

. It's an intelligent and sometimes chilling look at how potty-mouthed bully and control freak **Button**

has compensated for her underachievement and miserable existence by dragging down

long-suffering

Ronnie

with her – all the time manipulating her stooge by instilling a sense of gratitude and subsequent loyalty.

The drama is driven by the slow unravelling of this psychological grip, and witnessing Button's response: for a while the wrath we expect goes from simmer to *God of the Old Testament*. A moment of vulnerability completes the dimensions of a well-drawn, troubled beast of a character that McNulty and actress

Cathy Breeze

won't let you despise totally without a fight. Plaudits also go to

Tigga Goulding

for a sensitive but never overtly sympathy-harvesting portrayal of Ronnie.

Special Needs ushers us to the interval with another big dollop of seriousness, introducing us to the hapless *Greg* – caught in the crossfire of a hostile ex and a scheming new squeeze. Greg braves the firebreathing of erstwhile wife, Beverley, to organise some time with his disabled daughter. But his current hottie, Rachel, has something sinister up her sleeve. For me, **Mike Woodhead's** take on Greg is one of the real pleasures of the night. In an evening where actors are packed like sardines and – at times – over keen to make an impression, Woodhead offers up a gentle, loveable and generous turn, nailing down the frustrations, fears and grey shades of a man dominated by women.

The character I find it much harder to buy is *Beverley*. I don't have to look at the programme to know this was written by a man (**Trevor**

Suthers

It's a very male spin on
hell hath no fury

banshee-like exploits. Her rants become slightly tedious and tend towards the implausible: Greg's "having it off" (does anyone still say that?) with a cutie from the special school which leads her to suspect he may be sleeping with yet someone else; perhaps numerous people; possibly with every female working for the institution. My tuppence is this: what's far more interesting than Beverley's ire is Rachel's conniving – but the latter seems glossed over, an after-thought, for the benefit of the former.

Matthew Bloxham

's understated direction is worthy of a mention too, along with his arty but neat overlapping scene transitions.

With fresh beer in hand, we reconvene for the big belly laugh of the event. **David Isaac's** *Paradise Island*

is billed as "a detailed analysis of government immigration policy" which is such an unfulfilled promise of dryness, I suspect we are the butt of a joke.

From the off, this comedy fairy tale reduces everybody to a gibbering wreck of hysterics. A twisted and gag-laden morality yarn, it boasts performances so on the money that the actors must have tenners stuck to the soles of their shoes by the end. Sure, there's a sideways glance at a real issue in there somewhere, but this doesn't ever pretend to be much more than an onslaught of glorious daftness. In the context of the event's flow, it pounces at just the right time. Touches like a hand-puppet teddy bear playing the immigrant's wife punctuate the lunacy with jaw-dropping inspiration.

Martin Jameson's *Prostate* lavishes us with a fun story of a last hurrah waylaid by desperation, guilt and brow-mopping awkwardness. With the clock ticking on his prostate-cancer operation – and, potentially, his sexual potency – he looks up old flame *Karen* and ends up back at her place. It's a nice start to an engaging piece. It's a bit too obvious too soon that

Tony

wants more than to merely spill his seed for the final time – that strips proceedings of a little power. But the real chore, from where I'm sitting, is the appearance of Tony's tumour in personified form, Gove.

This is gimmickry as art form. There must be a simpler, more effective and less annoying way of showing Tony's inner turmoil. For one, it's a tad confusing. I only know Gove is supposed to be Tony's tumour having had a sly peek at the programme. Gove acts, to a man, like a sarcastic version of the devil on your shoulder. When he says he'll be removed by a surgeon soon, I consider that he's Tony's prostate itself; or his sexuality. Perhaps I missed a key reference, or my medical knowledge leaves much to be desired – but a malignant growth in human shape shooting for laughs doesn't quite cut it for me. Right now, I want more of the pensive, stuttering and heart-wrenching interactions between the co-protagonists – and less of that irritating, scene-stealing muppet.

Last up is **Carole Solazzo's** whistle-stop tour round the history of inducing female orgasms, ***Good Vibrations***

. Liv is a charismatic and charming everygirl with a dodgy scouse accent and a polka-dot dress. She's keeping her husband at arm's length for she gains nothing from carnal activity.

The synopsis makes this string of amusing vignettes sound more intriguing than it is – emphasising Liv's sale of her soul to the Devil. That's just a brief distraction, for no real consequences arise from her unwitting decision: Liv blunders on, bubbly as ever with nary a hint of a soulectomy. Her inhibitions, on the other hand, are nowhere to be seen as Liv's journey eschews internal conflict for the brash spectacle of a woman egging on yesteryear pioneers to tinker with her lady parts. It's a shame some great work is upstaged by one of the props – a fake vagina – taking unrehearsed flight from its tin, half way across the stage. But it's an innovative hoot. And it receives extra love for its happy ending – which, tonight, were at a premium. A

suitable climax in more ways than one.

At six quid, **JB Shorts 12** is staggering good value for money, and it enables entertainment that ranges from worthy to manic. There's a little bit of everyone's favourite flavour, and its accessibility will surely continue to draw non-theatre-goers into a fresh, surprising and brave world.