



[John and Mark](#)

By Northern Outlet Theatre Company

Reviewed by [Paul Thompson](#) November 2014

Tantrums and stonewalling have been a couple of responses to **George Gunby's** *John And Mark* on the other side of the M62 – and it is this that occupies my mind as I lounge amid the eclectic seating and woozy light of the basement space in Canal Street's Taurus Bar.

For over there – in the city where it all started – an argument goes something like this: Lennon assassin Mark Chapman wanted to steal his victim's fame; and any work of art that features the potty pistol wielder as a main character is pandering to that very desire for infamy. At a glance, it's a specious – even seductive – jerk of the knee; but it doesn't take much twisting of the lens to capture the immaturity and farce of this thought process.

If somebody claims to have killed for notoriety, we do not – and cannot – respond by doing a Thatcher and instigating a media blackout to deny our villain the oxygen of publicity. We do not shush ourselves with a finger on the mouth every time we catch ourselves uttering this supposed attention seeker's name. We ask questions. We try to understand. And this one-act offering – directed sweetly and sharply by *Northern Outlet Theatre Company's* **Paul Blinkhorn** – does both with passion, skill, tact and brawn. I must clarify, at this point, I've parted ways with the convention of chronology – opting to discuss the second show of tonight's double bill first. That's how I roll. I toss the rule book over my shoulder like so much trash.

So here's the set up: Mark Chapman (a sensitive but unflinching and nuanced portrayal by Matthew Howard-Norman) languishes in his prison cell, having carried out his dastardly deed a few years ago. He's visited by a number of characters, all but one of whom seem to be figments of his imagination or, in some cases possibly, ghosts.

Most notable of these illusions is, of course, the working-class hero himself. It's a real joy to witness, in a small room under a Gay Village pub, one of the best Lennons I've seen. Some actors fail to capture the charisma, but knock out a fairly decent impression; with Joseph, it's the other way round. The accent may lack the authentic nasal tone, but the mannerisms, the arrogance, the theatricality and moments of vulnerability are brought back to life in high definition. Displaying an exquisite range, **Tracy Gabbitas** completes the cast with a diverse

array of female roles – and, lo, we're in the world and mind of a human being who murdered a legend.

The playlet works on two levels. On its interpersonal surface, Chapman seeks forgiveness from Lennon. And this – by way of an extra-personal subtext – is a metaphor for the killer asking society to draw a line under this. Lennon, in turn, represents the parole board; the authorities; the world outside, still bitter, confused and unrelenting. He wants to know why – as we all do – that fateful choice was made. And, while his opposite number attempts to answer with a variety of musings, he cannot give Lennon what he wants... because, ultimately, Chapman doesn't know either.

It's this core conflict that drives the narrative and provides the entertainment – a verbal boxing match of dry humour, sadness, ire and baffled frustration. This is what suits the medium. It flags only, for me, when characters temporarily become neutral interviewers, prompting the other to relate fussy detail about biography and what actually happened. One sometimes senses a neediness to get all the facts and research out there – and there's a nagging suspicion the writer lost a little sight of dramatic concerns. Whose story is this? (Chapman's, I think.) And is this character a changed person by the end? (Maybe. But, if so, it was a bit too subtle; I like to be punched in the gut.)

Minor moans aside, it was a successful and heady mix of psychodrama and multi-directional therapy. Although Murray Schisgal's *Naked Old Man* is roughly the same length, and constitutes fifty percent of the evening's proceedings (the first half) – it is both visually and literally downgraded as the “supporting act” on the promotional material. The premise is that thing guaranteed to make anyone – not least a writer – squirm. A writer writing himself as a main character who is a writer talking about his life as a writer.

It's a monologue – not in the traditional sense of knocking that fourth wall down to self-consciously address the audience; but owing to the newer interpretation of single-character drama. This piece, for my money, provides only one dramatic question. But I'm not sure if it's supposed to be a dramatic question. Or whether it actually *is* a dramatic question. And it's this: is Murray a bit senile and imagining there are guests in his house? Or are there actually people there, and our imaginations are being called upon to fill in the gaps?

Granted, the question (that I wasn't certain was a question) got dealt with at the end, leaving me with the sensation of having had something to eat. But the overall effect was flatness: this was an old showbiz stalwart taking fifty minutes to ramble on about everything he thinks about life, ageing, death – in the process, spending much time quoting other thinkers who express his reflections so much better than he can. Is this drama? Or philosophy? And, well, just talking?

The talent-stuffed acting of **Richard Sails** is understated, measured, professional and believable. In another play, this would have been the perfect approach. I couldn't help wondering, though, if this needed something more. Something bigger. Riskier. If anything, Sails offers the text too much respect. I, personally, would like to have been distracted from the script's regular self-indulgences. But he just about managed to pull it off – I was always interested enough not to zone out. Without any doubt in my mind, though, this would work better as a fifteen-to-twenty minute short.

We have consumed an impressive main course with a dragged-out but worthwhile starter; and the near-sell-out crowd here correctly sniffed out a bargain. But beware of the prices upstairs at the bar. If you can stomach Fosters, that's a more reasonable £2.95 a pint before 7pm. There you go: never let it be said that my reviews lack important insights.