Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour , Liverpool Playhouse

Co-produced by National Theatre of Scotland and Live Theatre
Reviewed by Jane Turner May 2016

Anyone in any doubt about the frailty of the female should spend some time with this smoking, swearing, drunken, noisy and energetic teenage girl choir - on a mischief packed coach trip from their school "**Our Lady of Perpetual Succour**" (nicknamed the Virgin Megastore) in a small Scottish coastal town to the big city of Edinburgh. Rejoice in their youthful efforts to have as much excitement as possible, which in keeping with teenagers temporarily freed from adult control, mostly involves gossiping, sex – "doing it" - and exaggerating its place in their lives.

It sends out a message to those who think all young girls are potential victims, that girls are tough enough and big enough to handle whatever life throws at them and don't need a safe

space to retreat to, or to be cosseted from the big bad world. These girls are loud, scary and full of teenage bravado who deal with unwanted male attention without the need for a chaperone and with a stock of hilarious one-liners including “I only shag people born in the 20th century”.

That girls are perfectly capable of conducting their own sometimes messy sexual relations without the need for a chaperone is made abundantly clear in this story of ordinary girls from an ordinary town, who with their witty and foul mouthed put downs and withering facial expressions make it clear they are in charge. It is a poignant reminder for many of us too old to really remember, what it feels like to be a teenage girl making that awkward shift into adulthood, one minute sweet and expectant with a head full of questions and dreams, next minute sulky and slouchy, uncertain and angry. It is also a tale of the ups and downs and importance of female friendship, and cleverly but subtly in a presentation of individual monologues, raises a range of social issues including gender, sexuality, virginity, illness and religious repression and delivers strong messages about camaraderie and identity without making you feel like you have been lectured and harangued - all in an engrossing and seamless pulsating musical production.

Adapted from Alan Warner’s novel The Sopranos, by Lee Hall, the man behind Billy Elliot and The Pitmen Painters, it is a similar sentimental tale of a bunch of regular girls living in a humdrum town made interesting and enjoyable with an injection of music, singing and dancing. And, what a sublime selection of music it is, played beautifully by a three-piece on-stage band, accompanied by great individual voices, accomplished acapella, big bursts of popular numbers and a moving and melodic musical running commentary, that had me foot tapping one minute and dabbing away a few tears the next, from a nifty mixed bag of pop and classical music, including Bach, Handel, Bob Marley and ELO.

The six young actresses came in all shapes, sizes and personalities, and demonstrated enormous range and individuality, with remarkable acting and singing talent. I was particularly impressed by Dawn Sievewright as Fionnula, not only in the main part she played, but also in

her comedic impersonation of a range of male characters and in the beautiful voice of Melissa Allan as Orla. But hats off to all the young women as they worked so well together and pulled off an uninterrupted energetic piece of engrossing theatre with some great sound and visual effects.

There is no zero tolerance on rude jokes or bad language either, and from the outset we get a refreshing shot of everyday silly jokey, expletive laden and sexualised banter, and even a clever and comedic representation of a large penis (to howls of audience laughter), which would be much frowned on in PC circles in case of corruption or trauma. The cast give honest portrayals of the roller coaster of emotions that characterise the teenage years and have two things in common – singing in the choir and their teenage inner turmoil - but their backgrounds vary from anarchic and chaotic domestic set ups to middle class comfort and predictability, and their personalities range from complicated and controlling to wild and fragile. It is good to see a portrayal of young women freely enjoying themselves who don't have "victim" tattooed on their foreheads, despite being from "the projects", pregnant, ill or sexually confused.

My old school friend and I giggled constantly throughout the unrelenting swearing and coarse bravado, both reminded about what it had been like to be a teenager in a period without access to technology, free from over-restraint and recognising in the characters some of our old classroom contemporaries and a little of our uncertain but spirited teenage selves.

It is important to allow young people the freedom to experiment and express themselves, for them to engage with the world around them instead of being wrapped up in cotton wool and protected from emotional harm. As this story shows, life can be pretty uncomfortable and confusing at times, but it is better to be alive and living in it, with all its trials and tribulations, than tucked up in a safe space away from it.

It is a funny, absorbing, moving and enjoyable production with some show stopping musical moments and ends on a note that is both hilarious and moving in equal measure as Orla delivers some bad news to her friends, and they discuss the proposal by their priest to invent an apparition of the virgin Mary to get them out of trouble.

Life is full of possibilities, Fionnula notes, as she reflects on how we are often only a tiny percentage of what we could have been. To that I would say, that this production and performance gave nothing less than 100%. Sick, as a teenager might say.

The Cast: Melissa Allan – Orla, Caroline Deyga – Chell, Karen Fishwick – Kay, Kirsty MacLaren – Manda, Frances Mayli McCann – Kylah, and Dawn Sievewright – Fionnula. Directed by Vicky Featherstone, with Music Arranged by Martin Lowe.

Liverpool Playhouse – Tuesday 31 May – Saturday 4 June. Go and see!