

# Gems in the scrum

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## Theatre

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Edinburgh Festival and Fringe

**E**dinburgh during the Festival is a city of posters, placards, handbills, street performers, publicists (most of them amateur) and youthful aspirations. A great deal of what is on offer is unenticing. But there are always rewards, too — incidental pleasures and the occasional first-rate production.

This year, for instance, the streets were enlivened by the attractive sounds of a mini-brass band from Russia, the St Petersburg Baroque Brass Quintet. (They even tootled a little Wagner outside the theatre where *Das Rheingold* was being performed.) Another notable novelty was a flea circus in the Princes Street Gardens, with video enlargements of the tiny creatures performing their tricks: the smallest greatest show on Earth.

As for the theatre proper, I came across at least one show for which I felt unreserved enthusiasm: *Alone It Stands*, at the Traverse Theatre. Written and directed by John Breen, and performed by an Irish company called Yew Tree, it celebrates one of the great legendary occasions of Irish sport (the more legendary because it wasn't televised): the rugby match in which the amateurs of Munster beat the otherwise invincible All Blacks during their European tour of 1978.

A company of six (five actors and a redoubtable actress) double as both teams. With a few brilliantly choreographed moves they evoke tackles and scrummages and endow the players with firmly etched personalities. We have got to know them before the match, too. The Irish coach piles on lugubrious warnings about the agony in store. The New Zea-

land coach delivers a terrifying pep talk during which he fines one player \$80 for "audible sighing".

You don't have to be rugby-mad to enjoy all this, and in any case the action spills over into the non-rugby world. The Munster captain learns that his father has died while the game is in progress (an actual incident); the wife of one of the players gives birth (there is some brilliant cross-cutting between football pitch and delivery room). Add a few spectators, and rival gangs of kids building bonfires, and you begin to get a picture of an entire community. The mood is affirmative but never cloying; the characterisation is rich and humorous. It is an exhilarating show, which deserves to be seen far and wide.

By contrast the big attraction at the Traverse, or what should have been, was a let-down. Kate Atkinson's *Abandonment* features a not very convincing historian called Elizabeth and the ghost of a Victorian governess who haunts the house she moves into. Elizabeth's entourage include an adoptive mother and sister (she was abandoned as a child), a lesbian chum, a prattling builder and a photographer with dishonourable intentions. Victorian flashbacks reveal that they had their rough equivalents in the past. The men in both eras, unlike the heroines, tend to be bad news.

You can see lots of ideas being wheeled into place, but despite some nice performances (especially from Sheila Reid as a modern mother and a Victorian mama) they never come to life. The dialogue is stodgy, the jokes seem dutiful. Atkinson is much admired as a novelist, but on this evidence she still has a long way to go as a dramatist.

Conor McPherson, on the other hand, was clearly an accomplished dramatist from the word go, long before he wrote *The Weir*. *Rum and Vodka*, at the Assembly Rooms, consisted of his two earliest plays, monologues written while he was still a student. In the first of them, a young married office worker

(Alan Mooney) sets out on a monumental binge and becomes embroiled with a rich girl called Myfanwy and her smart friends. It is too long, but even so there is a dreamlike vividness and precision in the narrative that holds you transfixed.

The second piece is more compact. A professional thug (Brendan Fleming) undertakes some intimidation at the behest of his boss, but other thugs show up and it goes horribly wrong. The initial shoot-out is a little too Tarantino for my taste, but as soon as the narrator takes flight, bundling his victim's wife and child into the car with him, we embark on a strange, compelling odyssey.



Ranting Karl Shiels and Cathy White in *Barbaric Comedies*

The Assembly Rooms was also the setting for *Picasso's Women*, four separate short plays by Brian McAvera — monologues again — in which four different actresses played women who had the mixed fortune to become involved with the great man. I saw Amanda Harris as Françoise Gilot, and I wasn't disappointed. The play effectively demonstrates that Picasso could be "a total bastard" (McAvera's phrase) without trying to belittle him as an artist. Harris gave a fine performance, spirited without ever turning strident.

Quintessential Edinburgh, or at any rate the quintessential Fringe, means low comedy. So I hauled myself up to the Pleasance to see *Puppetry of the Penis*.

The show is pretty much what the title suggests. Two performers — both Australian, both naked apart from floppy sun hats — stand on stage, chatting amiably. Every so often they turn their backs and manipulate their private parts in much the same way that children knead funny putty. When they turn round again we can see the results, which are also shown on a large screen: ingenious renderings of, among other things, the Eiffel Tower, the Loch Ness Monster, a wrist-watch, a hamburger and a "slow-emerging mollusc".

I think it can fairly be called an intensely Australian show, and I am not sure I would have wanted to see it performed by anyone except Australians. But whatever the reason, it works. It is often funny; it is never as revolting as you are afraid it is going to be (well, hardly ever); it even has a certain youthful charm.

**A**nd where was the official Festival while all this was going on? It ought, by rights, to come first in an Edinburgh round-up. But not this year; not, at any rate, the two productions I saw.

*Barbaric Comedies*, at the King's Theatre, is an adaptation by Frank McGuinness of a trilogy by the Spanish writer Ramon del Valle-Inclan, produced by the Abbey Theatre and running to almost four hours. A landowner spends half the play proving that he is a great sinner, and then repents; his sons, as we are repeatedly told, behave like a pack of wolves. There is a great deal of shouting and ranting, and a particularly nasty rape; I was often confused, and hardly ever felt involved.

At the Royal Lyceum, the SITI company of New York were presenting *Cabin Pressure*. Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, this is an examination of the nature of audiences, and of acting, that contrives to be both grandiose and whimsical. The cast made the most of their light-hearted moments, but once again you were left wondering what on earth the official Festival thinks it is up to.