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Rosierdam

//

Thinking inside the box

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Heavy and oddly light

#5

# NOISES OFF

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## Editorial #5

This is our final glossy editorial. Our final size 9 page 2 editorial. Of NSDF '19. The Festival. Who knows what the editorial will be in the zine *Noises Off*. It could be anything.

We keep looking at each other and wondering if we've forgotten to do something. We couldn't have anticipated what this year's festival would be. We both held notions of the week, an accumulated sense – formed from experience and anticipation – of what would lie ahead in each day. The sum: an abstraction of intensity, discussion, suspect lunches and unparalleled experiences of theatre.

The truth is that we haven't had the chance to see as many shows as most of you reading this have. Our sense of the selection has trickled in from the eyes and ears of our writers. And they've done an incredible job. They've worked immensely hard and we couldn't be prouder of the work they've written, the conversations they've started, and the ways in which they have pushed each other and themselves to think deeply and to write with the force and truthfulness you've been reading throughout the week.

On that note, we'd like to offer some thanks. To James, for bringing us on board after just a

phone call on a slightly dodgy connection and a few emails. What we've been able to achieve with *Noff* this year is all down to you; in the words of Naomi you are 'phenomenally helpful', and she really doesn't pile on the compliments. Thanks for letting us make so many jokes about you. And to Lizzie – thank you for your continued support, putting up with our sometimes slightly panicked requests. We owe Ellie, the entire management team, and countless others oodles of gratitude for all their hard work to make *Noff* happen. Thank you to Mark Shenton and Donna Munday for their tireless fundraising, and to all those who donated – this week has been magical and you've made it that.

Every single person who comes here to see and make art brings their own experiences. *Noff* has a mission to capture the thoughts and ideas of the festival, a festival only made possible by us all being here, together. It's pained us, as we've huddled round our planning whiteboard each morning, that there are only a finite number of pages in which we can conserve so many feelings. We'd love to have included every single piece we were sent.

In this issue our contributors respond to *Rotterdam*, *Yen*, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and *BARRY*, as well as thinkpieces on criticism, the wise words of Simon Stephens and information from Donna Munday on how NSDF is funded. The shows at this festival have probed and

questioned us. They've moved us, made us laugh and question. Regardless of what we sum up as critics trying to condense, each one has created a unique experience, a something where there was nothing, and that shouldn't ever be taken for granted. It's a huge undertaking. A show of strength and courage.

Earlier in the week, we joked that the two of us would merge and conglomerate into one mass editor brain. We are now genuinely finishing each other's sentences. It has happened. It's time to wrap this baby up.

**Naomi and Florence xoxo**  
**Editors**

*The conversation continues online [nsdf.org.uk/noises-off](https://nsdf.org.uk/noises-off)*



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# All that glitters

*Pushkin is repurposed for beautiful ends in TANYA, says* **Nathan Dunn**

**To me, a theatre show that can be described as a 'meditation' is a show that opts for a fluid presentation of information that is both introspective and interrogative in order to provoke conceptually-based reflections for an audience.**

It neglects traditional storytelling structure in a bid to evoke alternative thought. In unpretentious terms, it's a show that usually doesn't have a beginning, middle and end but is full of content presented in interesting ways that leans towards one idea or many similar ideas. *TANYA* is an especially fascinating case study for me with this argument, as although it makes no claims to be one or the other, it seems to be both story and meditation – layered seamlessly atop of each other.

My first commendations must go to Flora Wilson Brown's impressive handling of the adaptation. She successfully wills her way through the skeleton of Pushkin's novel in verse and totally reinvents the narrative from the inside out, giving it a texture and flavour that perfectly encapsulates the emotional jeopardy of the privileged millennial experience. Although at face value it might have a *Skins*-like aesthetic,

this re-imagining of 19th-century Russian literature is predictably more sophisticated than that. The four characters constantly push against the monolithic maelstrom of self-worth politics. They wage war with themselves and each other, all the while internally seeking to dismantle the constructs society has imposed them. Specifically, they claw at constructs that tell them that they need love to satisfy (and justify, even) their own existence. For some, this is self-love. For some, it's the love of others they crave. But for all, it proves to be a messy route they navigate, and something they never ultimately solve. It's painfully indicative of our own culture. However, that isn't a cheaply earned reflection on how a piece of theatre is 'relevant' (that should be a prerequisite for all theatre, right?), but instead a recognition of the place this play has come from. The archaic DNA of *Onegin* beautifully evolves into something emotionally harrowing, intellectually antagonising and critical of its own culture – all whilst maintaining the lyrical sensibilities of Pushkin's original text.

Jimmy Dougan's direction is equally as admirable. He refracts the tension of youthful existentialism through an appropriately explorative lens. Naturally, despite their apt

intentions, such adventurous approach has its risks. The presentation of *TANYA* claws at your perception, providing something tonally identifiable yet experientially complex. Despite taking place over a weekend, the piece has the feel of a play taking place in real-time. Though it is impossible to say if this and many of the other directorial caveats are intentional, it's certainly disorientating. It arrests our attention slightly, and I'm not sure if it should. Theatrical devices feed our senses whilst invading our conscious with significance. Decisions such as gold glitter substituting the sterile whiteness of cocaine are deliberate, and this deliberation makes them all the more provocative.

In a world where it rains gold, people still bleed. *TANYA* successfully gives us a meditation on the human condition whilst telling us a story in a way as accessible as recalling the events of a house party gone wrong to a friend. Except we don't have the burden of the trauma.

Do we?



## Deconstructed form

*Joseph Winer sees potential in TANYA*

**Flora Wilson Brown's adaptation of Pushkin's tale of love and tragedy is a delicate and sometimes witty text, which makes some interesting staging choices in Jimmy Dougan's production but doesn't fully commit to itself. After Tanya meets the charming Eugene and dances with him through a sparkling rainfall of gold confetti, he turns out to be just a bit of a dick really (there's a surprise), leading the play to a bloody conclusion.**

I'm delighted to see that the technicians operating the show are positioned on the stage. We get a real sense that this is a play that's going to deconstruct the form in front of us, or at the very least reveal the labour. And there's a few elements that do this really well. The buckets of gold create moments of theatrical magic. The cup of blood that is poured over the body's head provides a dark, thick syrup to an otherwise liquid-free set.

It starts with a slowness. A static. The technician cues the lights. Four actors step into position at

the back of the deep stage. And then they run forward into the light. We see their faces looking out at us. We don't see this effect repeated until the play's final moment. And with that final moment, it feels like a "sad bit". And I'm pissed off that he gets to be the one to claim that final spotlight. The dance throughout the show is a nice choice, but I don't think it's acutely stylised enough to do what it could do to its full potential.

Brown's script contains some brilliant phrases. A response to 'He's trying to get with you isn't he?' with 'He's so posh it's hard to tell' is a particular favourite. There's intriguing discussion about pain and art, about what the function of art is. About what poetry is for. And this neatly threads in with the deconstructive nature of the performance. I just wish it was somehow even more deconstructive. A bit more descriptive imagery would've really helped bring the world of the play to life.

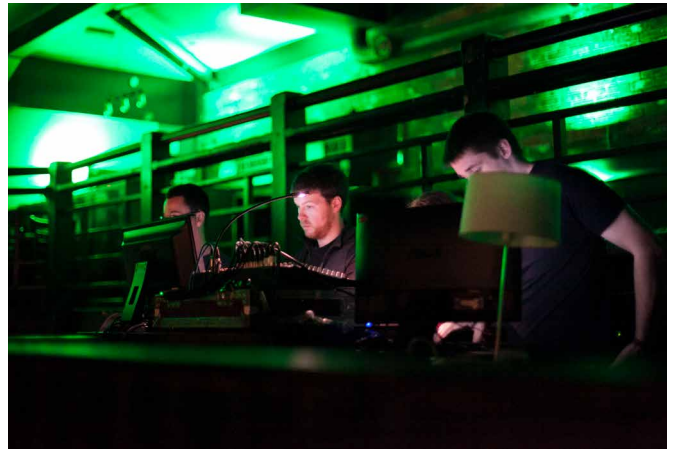
A strong ensemble presents the story. Darcy Dobson's Tanya is particularly impressive. It had

reminiscences of Billie Piper's performance in *Yerma*. She's so on the verge of commanding the stage, but the depth of the performance space results in all the cast being slightly absorbed by the room. The end-on staging keeps us distanced from the action, and sometimes it feels like they've forgotten about their audience. We want to be running through the story with them, and a more intimate setup would help achieve this.

I think the tension struggles to change much. I thought this might be a stylistic choice at one point. It's almost as if this is a story that the creatives actively dislike, and I thought the deconstructive theatrical elements were leaning towards this. But that doesn't carry through. I don't feel the hit at the end like I think I should. The result is a successful textual adaptation in a production that doesn't seem too sure of itself.







# Changing my mind (again)

Emma Rogerson on theatre criticism



**if you were to ask me what i am, depending if i was feeling existential or passionate or drunk enough to be completely honest, i'd say 'writer'. i'd need those conditions, because it's quite a wanky answer to throw into a normal conversation (i accept that). but it's the truth, because it's the only label i feel 100% comfortable giving myself.**

my class, my sexual orientation, my gender all feel secondary to that, because that's who i am, not what i've chosen and what i choose is to make, to write, and that is so representative of who i am, and that's easy, that's simple, tick, i get that. until a few months ago, what i wrote created my life experiences, not the other way around. some of the best memories and friends i've made are completely attributable for writing plays, and that forms the backbone of my social and day to day life. writing academically allowed me to go to university – one that wasn't for me that i soon dropped out of, and another, bristol, where i'm currently studying, which allowed me to live in new cities and gave me time and resources to explore and engage in new ideas.

and that's all fine.

but the idea of writing 'criticism' and 'being a critic' sits really uneasily with me.

before i applied for noises off, 'criticism' was a word that was representative of everything i hated about the arts. i wanted to stay as far away from it as possible, because i saw it solely as a measure of privilege. my experience of reviewers so far had been them watching my own plays (that explore feminism, north western

narratives, queer love stories...etc) broken down and analysed by white men who had seen a lot of theatre. i used to think that reviewing necessitates a level of a cultural capital that i just couldn't access. now this really isn't meant to slag off white men or their opinions at all. in fact, i think we stray into really dangerous territory when we, as creators and consumers, prioritise one person's perspective or life experiences over another's. starting from a point of 'everyone is equally valid' seems like a much better foundation, with programmers, producers and editors having responsibility to monitor the writers who are engaged to criticise and ensure diversity among journalists and representation for all of society. but, from my experience, people didn't care enough. it wasn't happening.

i started in amdram, applied theatre, theatre in village halls, theatre after school, local theatre, theatre that makes your life better. i never saw that represented by criticism. criticism was value judgement only, but when what i value most in theatre was never acknowledged, what can i contribute? what can i offer?

the emergence of 'embedded criticism', which felt like a shift from product to process, felt like a step in the right direction and something i could access. after that, i wanted in.

i got to write for noises off, and so have had the chance to practise criticism in the context of what i prioritise – i've been lucky enough to both articulate and practise a feeling that i've had for a long time, that i just fundamentally don't think theatre reviews should rely on being referential to other pieces of theatre. in

magic hour, watching the fun improv bouncing between actor and audience made me remember my collective group of home friends absolutely rinsing me one new years eve for my (admittedly quite pretentious at the time) instagram. in how to save a rock, i thought back to a really interesting conversation in a mate's kitchen about the environmental ethics of having kids. in things we do not know, the sensitivity with which the stories were handled reminded me of countless instances of kindness and generosity friends, family and strangers have shown me.

theatre is just so inseparable from life experience, and i'm reluctant to even call myself a critic as it implies some weird hierarchy or objectivity – both of which i'm incapable of – when i'm really just another audience maker trying to make something, out of those little moments on stage, last for the rest of my life. sometimes it doesn't work, sometimes it does. sometimes i feel nothing, sometimes i feel too much, sometimes i'm too tired or hungover to appreciate it, sometimes i'm desperate for it, i rely on it, and it's everything i need.

criticism, for me, has just come to mean starting conversations.

redefining what criticism is and what it can do starts the conversations, allows everyone to participate equally, and has the potential to make reviews art, not analysis.

it's worth redefining. it's worth changing.





## Thinking inside the box

Lucy Thompson *thinks outside the box*

Could have been so atmospheric – I really wanted a feeling of 'Rotterdam', of an alien, far-from-home city full of bodies passing through.

Where were the visuals or the design that would make us feel uncomfortable in this space?

Projections were only used twice; a photo of the skyline which felt disjointed floating above the rest of the show. They could have been integrated really interestingly into the piece, creating this vibe of Rotterdam as a modern city and developing the idea of Alice and Adrian's suspension in an unfamiliar place.

The silhouettes of Lelani and Alice on the ice were beautiful... a visual to be utilised more.

More fun ice projections please

The big, naturalistic set shares a sense of Alice and Adrian's home and life over the past 7 years, adding depth the script doesn't give us.

But it made the play feel static – there's so many scenes outside the home that the big set often felt awkward and unnecessary.

Very, very good acting. Especially from Alice and Adrian – you felt the high stakes and the love (lost) between them.

(If anything the production coasted on the strength of the actors...)

I liked the  
fairy lights

A lot of design  
choices

felt very  
functional

Felt boring? I'd have liked to see the magic happen.

Long scene changes in the dark really slowed the play down.

Or could the scene changes have been used creatively? The script shows us nothing of Alice and Adrian's relationship outside the narrative of Adrian's transition... Could we have seen this between scenes?

Jon Brittain if you're reading, I'd love to chat to you about the script itself..

## Embedded critic

*The BARRY rehearsal room is open and playful, says Joseph Winer*

**In a first for NSDF, the selectors have programmed a work-in-progress production from Edinburgh University's Shrinking Violet. *BARRY* is an exploration of the life and historicity of Dr. James Barry (henceforth referred to as just 'Barry'), who has been described as Edinburgh's first 'woman' to graduate.**

This has sparked major controversy, as Barry identified as male from the age of twenty, wearing man's clothes and using male pronouns. Queer-identifying author EJ Levy's upcoming book, *The Cape Doctor*, uses female pronouns to refer to Barry. Shrinking Violet use techniques including lip-syncing, costume exploration, and verbatim text from various sources. This week, they've invited me into their rehearsal room as an embedded critic for a first-hand experience of the work in progress.

From the moment they begin (despite an early start on Monday morning) the room makes it an absolute duty to "play". The cast and creatives blast out some tunes and get going with a lively warm-up. There's not much sitting around in this rehearsal room. The collaborative sense of ensemble is already being established in the way they conduct their warm-up. Ideas bounce off each other. They play a game where insults are thrown around. Another suggests they make them Victorian insults to get into the era. As they get into devising, there's a structure to stick to, which provides within it plenty of room for play. They often split into smaller groups, devise separately and then share their work to each other. This enables them to switch between spectator and performer. All ideas are on the table and they group are willing to try out almost

everything.

It's such a pleasure, in a theatre world which focuses so much on the final product, to witness work as its developing. I overhear in the room comments which reinforce the emphasis on trying things out. 'This is all ideas', 'Give it a bash', and 'Let's try it' sum up the company's attitude to giving it a go. There's an openness to getting things wrong, something which has been an integral part of this show's development process. They originally performed it as part of Edinburgh University's Bedlam Festival in January this year. After a five-and-a-half week devising and rehearsal period, they realised that they'd made a mistake and focused on the wrong narrative. They wanted to go back and do it again. NSDF have provided a platform for them to do so.

We've been talking quite a bit this week about the process of accepting blame. We've acknowledged that it's not always easy. I'm sure many theatre-makers have reached this same conclusion at the end of the devising process – that they've not done justice to the story – so how bloody brilliant is it that this company get to go back and do it again! Theatre is about live performance. It's about making work under pressure. As we've seen from this week, this can be the pressure of timescale, budget or following criteria on an academic syllabus. This lot haven't just let a 'mess' (their words not mine) of a show get brushed under a carpet. What is theatre if it's not a place for us to fail and try again?

And really, we could argue, that all the shows this week are to some extent a work-in-progress. We're all students just making work, trying things out, seeing what happens. Every year

at NSDF, the comment 'how did that show get here' often comes up at some point. And everyone has different opinions on which one that show is. But I think, from the conversations I've had this week, this is due to an emphasis on the show as a finished production. We don't seem to value the potential, the ambition, the experimentation, nearly as much as we focus on what we're sold: on the spectacle.

The work in progress throughout the week of the festival has prompted the company to respond to the festival itself. In rehearsal this morning, much talk was cued by yesterday's discussion on authenticity. Some of the points that have been raised were carried on into the rehearsal room. The performers are using the week's discourse to really interrogate the work that they're making.

Who has the right to tell other people's stories? This has been a buzz topic of the week. One opinion is that it's fine for makers to make work that represent other people, so long as said people have been consulted and had creative input. The company of *BARRY* have three gender non-conforming creatives involved, two as consultants and one who is performing as part of the piece. But does that alone give them the right to explore a real-life historical person? No one knows for certain how the real-life Barry identified. And gender itself is temporal and only relates to the cultural moment it's a part of anyway. Do any of us really have the right to tell stories about anyone?

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# What does NSDF cost?

Donna Munday gives us a rundown

**I've been asked a few times this week about what NSDF actually costs? i.e. in pounds and pence (as opposed to emotional cost :)), what does it cost to put on a festival with 12 shows, over 100 workshops, daily discussions, *Noises Off*, forums, night-time events, not to mention selecting 120 show throughout the year across the UK.**

The answer is, about £200k per year. This pays for the following things:

Staff – we have just two year-round staff posts – currently James and Lizzie, plus a team of people who we engage in the lead-up to and during the festival i.e. Ellie (workshops), Graeme (technical), Florence and Naomi (*Noff*), Brett (digital), plus our senior technical team and advisors, and also our selectors who attend the Festival.

Selections – sending our team of fabulous selectors around the country to see every show that is entered – often this means a long train journey and an overnight stay. For the 2019 festival we did 120 selections.

Festival prep – things like site visits, meetings with venues, the annual selection day.

The biggest cost is the festival week itself. Our costs include:

Staff, (as above) ticket bursary scheme, travel and accommodation for staff team and visiting artists, technical equipment, judges, catering, venue hire, production costs, advertising, festival programme, t-shirts/hoodies, awards, transport.

We also have to pay for a lot of very boring things like:

Insurance, DBS checks, photocopying, phones, accountancy, tech storage etc.

All of these things make up the aforementioned

£200k per year, and on top of that we incur an additional £65k of costs which is given to us “in kind”, i.e. donated by our incredibly generous supporters. This covers:

Our offices and printing (donated by the Peter de Haan Charitable Trust), and nearly all of our technical equipment which is donated by SLX and Blackout. We would not be able to deliver this Festival without the support of these companies, along with others named below.

So, how do we pay for all of these costs?

Our biggest supporter is the Arts Council of England, who give us an annual grant of £56k. The Sunday Times give us a significant annual sponsorship, which is in fact the longest running sponsorship in UK arts history. Several other trusts give us grants, including the Peter de Haan Charitable Trust, the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation, the Martin Bowley Charitable Trust, and perhaps most importantly, the Arts Patrons' Trust who have paid for our bursary scheme for the past 3 years. This scheme allows people to come to the festival who could not normally afford to buy a ticket – 105 bursaries were given out this year! And as well as the incredibly generous donation of tech kit from SLX, Blackout, Sound Stage Services and EM Acoustics, this year Curve have been astoundingly supportive by providing their venue and staff for free. The 2019 festival couldn't have happened without Curve and all of the above supporters and funders.

As you probably know, all arts organisations cannot rely on grants and donations alone, and have to generate their own income too. For NSDF this income includes:

The 120 shows that pay for a selection (though the entry fee doesn't cover the costs); the ticket cost that you pay contributes towards the income, and we also receive other donations from individuals.

As you may have heard, 2018-19 has been a tough financial year for NSDF. We unexpectedly lost a stream of funding, and have been fundraising to replace it – not all of that money has been raised yet. Also, some of our 3-year funding is coming to an end this year, and we have to replace those grants in order for the Festival to continue.

Many, many people give their time and/or equipment for free, and we thank them for that enormously. The Board of Directors gives their time for free, and this year we want to say a special thank you to Mark Shenton and Sarah Nicholson, both of whom raised funds – (in Mark's case specifically for *Noff*). Some of you have asked how we can afford for *Noff* to be so beautifully and expensively printed – the answer is that the Peter de Haan Charitable Trust have a print shop in Leicester and they do it all for free.

THANK YOU to all the companies, organisations and individuals that support us, especially Arts Council England, the Sunday Times, Peter de Haan and Curve. We also need to put James, Lizzie, Ellie and Graeme on a pedestal to thank them for the absolutely brilliant work they have done in making NSDF '19 so spectacularly successful.

Finally, all of us on the board and staff understand that this is not a cheap week for young people, and we are constantly doing everything we can to make it more affordable.

This is a sincere comment – if any of you (or your parents) are secret millionaires, we are very serious in our quest for further long term funding to replace the two trusts whose grants are ending this year. If you want to know more, or offer support, please contact the NSDF office after the Festival, or grab James or me this week.

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## It's Simon Stephens!

Grace Patrick reflects on Simon Stephens' Q and A

This feels a strange piece to write, because Simon Stephens is a playwright (and also he's *Simon Stephens*), and I'm not, but there were a couple of things that he said yesterday that felt so resonant that I am now going to add my thoughts to his thoughts, and you're probably going to read it :)

*"When I'm actually writing...I know in my soul as deeply as I know anything, that it is all bullshit"*

I mean, God. He's not wrong. I've been sitting in the Noffice for coming up on five hours this morning, and this is the third piece that I've written. I'm surrounded by incredibly talented writers and editors, all of whom are some of the most creative people I've ever met, but I'm sure they've all known that creeping sense of what's the point? What makes the words that I'm writing not utter rubbish? There's a kind of nihilistic glory in letting go of all that, and accepting that maybe all of this is wonderfully meaningless.

*"If you worry about your career too much at any stage of your working life...then you will be distracted from the important business of getting the work right."*

Right. Ok. I understand the sentiment. However.

Firstly, the majority of writers can't think only about the process of their creative work, because they've got at least one money job to do. Whether I count my creative work or my other work as a career, I'm struggling on how to avoid thinking about my career. But maybe that's just me.

Additionally, maybe thinking about a career can benefit your work, simply by broadening your understanding of the world you're trying to write about.

*"One of our responsibilities in theatre is to create spaces of psychosis and terror, that they be less engaged with in real life"*

I've listened back to and read this quote many times now, but I'm not convinced that I've pinned down its meaning. However, I think I've got it down to two possibles:

1. If we let them exist in theatre, we'll collectively create fewer in the real world
2. If we let them exist in theatre, we'll be more reluctant to engage with the ones that other people continue to make.

However, I literally cannot work out how either of those statements would be true. I believe that there are myriad reasons to present horror on stage, but I don't think that the act of putting them in a play can vaccinate the real world against their non fictional counterparts.

It's lucky that a lot of NSDF is about learning to disagree, because that's definitely the main thing that I'm picking up. I'm very much aware that I'm sitting here shaping and reshaping responses to things that were said off the cuff, but I hope that the sentiments can still mean something. I'm still learning and I will be for the rest of my life, but here's where I stand – for the time being – in comparison to (a few quotes from) Simon Stephens.



# An apology to Jenny

**Sophie Wright** *questions the violence towards women in Yen*

**I think it was unfair of me to go into *Yen* knowing how it ended. In my defence, I went into it forgetting how angry it makes me.**

The context is unfamiliar. The language is unforgiving. The characters are difficult to sympathise with. And yet, Jenny's presence in the boys' feral lives transforms them. She is like a mother to them, a master, a pretty thing that feeds them chips. The boys' real mother treats her like a threat. Jenny talks of her own mother needing her daughter as an emotional crutch. She is used, used, used.

The entirety of the show posits kindness against fury, neglect and violence. Jenny offers compassion and suffers brutally. It is a simplistic attitude to take that the boy who raped Jenny is unforgivable, that his brother who scared her is unlovable. And yet, Jenny is a teenage girl who decided to try and use her love for good, and yet her rape is used purely as a plot device, and yet she is used as an object in the service of her attackers' rehabilitation, and yet she joins a long list of fictional women that suffer physical

and sexual violence to further narratives and metaphors and plots, and yet.

Last year I read an article online by Eve Leigh, who had seen a show depicting violence against women, and her subsequent decision to avoid consuming media that benefited from it. Something that stuck with me: if the huge ugly edifice of capitalist heteropatriarchy isn't blocking the entire view/what might we do with all that empty sky?

What could have Anna Jordan written? What else could have won the Bruntwood Prize? Why do we have a show in NSDF that asks festival goers to sympathise with rapists? Why is there more money made from the story of a teenage girl suffering awful pain? There are plenty of other shows out there that offer just as amazing an acting exercise or lease of creative freedom as *Yen*. There are ways to show Jenny's attacker as both a boy and a criminal, without using her pain in its service. There must be.

?

## Bitter/sweet

**Emma Rogerson** *is engaged by the ferocity of Yen*

**Pound of Flesh's production of Anna Jordan's *Yen* was described in the discussion hour as "confrontational", and that's definitely an apt word to use. With fight sequences that came claustrophobically close to the audience and an in the round setting that firmly set the us as spectators of the story and each other, it's clear to see why. And it makes for an utterly compelling and captivating atmosphere.**

The momentum of the play builds off of juxtapositions. Bobbie's youthful energy and playfulness set against Hench's caution, shyness, his inability to articulate. The tension between them and the benign fights that they share are really believable, and it's really lovely to see the contrast between irritability and tension encapsulated by Hench's physicality alongside Bobbie's fluid, gullible presence. Similarly, Maggie's carelessness and entitlement against Jennifer's compassion and hesitancy make for a really interesting dynamic, not only as characters in their own right but in the place they occupy as the women in Hench and Bobbie's lives.

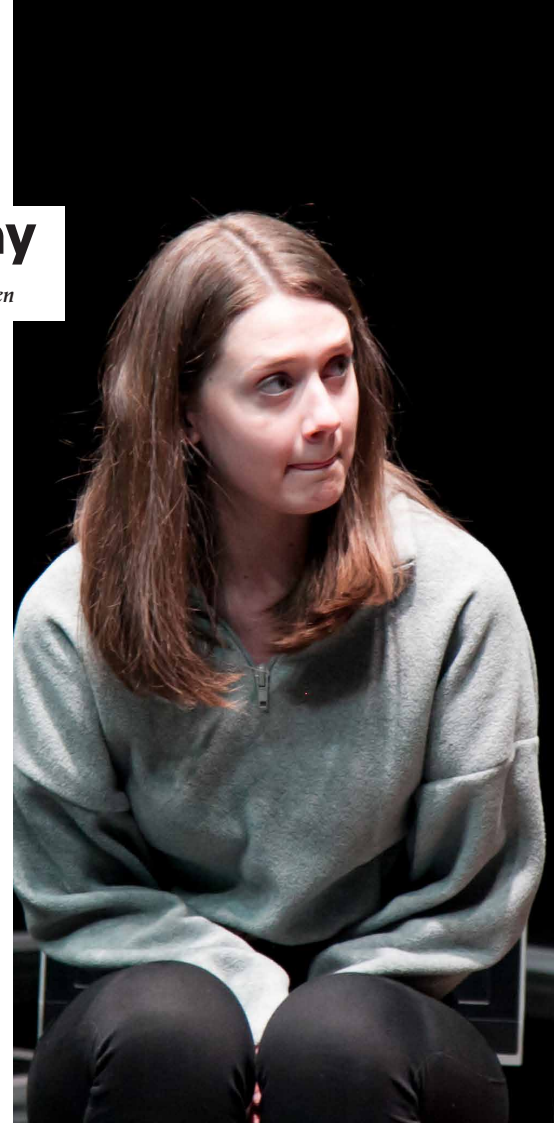
All the actors do a really strong job at sustaining the energy throughout the piece (one of the longer plays at NSDF) and the conflicts ripple

throughout the show, in the tensions and the relationships and the writing. Particularly impressive were the digital interludes between each of the scenes set to electronic music. They compiled various sources, from sexualised women to Jeremy Kyle to Disney films to demonstrate the passage of time between each of the scenes. A smart choice, which not only aided the function of the play but which also made for a really provocative, interesting contrast with the video games and porn that is used as media during the scene.

In the interest of wanting a future for this show and to improve it further, there was one aspect that stood out as a bit of an oversight. The majority of the set was really suitable and believable as the bedroom the brothers share, from the dirty mattress to the stacks of Playstation games. However, I couldn't help but cringe a bit when the Mac was used by Bobbie and Hench. The apple icon is so synonymous and symbolic of a class and level of wealth that is just fundamentally inaccessible to the characters of *Yen*, which was a massive shame as it was clear that the actors and direction supported this very accurate and sensitive portrayal of a working class narrative.

It's a super easy thing to fix, but maybe this is indicative of a need with this kind of production to constantly research and constantly develop awareness of the issues that are being explored. It was touched on in the discussion hour really well by the cast and director, and the acknowledgement of the privilege that the team approached the topic with seemed really genuine and authentic. If the research and development carries on, the future of this production is solid.

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# Complex qualities

Strong performances, but **Marina Johnson** wanted more from this story

**I really wanted to like *Rotterdam* but I couldn't bring myself to. It is a show about queer life for the inexperienced, cis individuals or people new to the idea of life beyond the gender binary. There is some truly terrible clunky exposition. It's not really a show for knowledgeable queer individuals, or people looking for a trans narrative that is not about trauma. In the same way that individuals who struggle with their mental health like myself, may not want to watch another show about suicide, *Rotterdam* raises issues of socially created trans trauma. For those of us up for watching the show, we get a tragic love story.**

The cast do their best with the script to bring these disaster lesbians to life. Maddy Strauss and Lara Cowler are an engaging couple, totally absorbing. They open with a beautiful sense of old married couple, which slowly and tragically slips away as they grow further apart. Lara Cowler as the impulsive and confident Adrian was heartbreakingly watchable as they navigated their transition and the complex societal pressures that came crashing down on them. It was one of the strongest performances I have seen this festival, but it couldn't hold my attention enough to compete with the dragging transitions draining all that hard work away.

Megan Peace did her best with the character of Lelani, bringing a slick and stylish performance which veered from vibrating-jumpy-eagerness to ice-cold charm seamlessly and almost believably. Lelani seemed to have been written merely to add chaos and conflict to an already perfectly strong premise. Of course, the only other lesbian

in the show would end up being a homewrecker, I've never seen that before. Let's also have this woman who has been out for years commit the cardinal sin of outing someone to their parents, because that makes sense.

Things I am glad are dying in theatre:

- Blackouts. All that emotional energy, pacing and atmosphere you just spent a scene building – just get rid of it, we don't need it.
- Long scene changes, that take forever to happen and add nothing of value to a scene. The audience can wait. Right? In darkness.
- Unnecessarily large sets of locations that are merely a backdrop to the overall production and are never truly engaged with. I was just staring at the beige wall feeling sorry for whoever had to ship it from Nottingham.
- Surprise projection. Ah yes, I can tell the scene has changed. That rooftop view is just so photorealistic.

The script may have been a radical show if performed in 2001. Not any more. The discourse is fast-moving and cutting edge has moved on. If this has been your introduction to the topic, I can heartily recommend *Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson. I also want to trouble the narrative about trans experiences always having to be trauma. So I'll finish by listening to a trans perspective. This is a Facebook post from former editor at Fearlessly, Bonnie Aspinwall:

*"When I first realised I'm trans and non-binary it felt strange because I didn't have the narrative of trauma that society had led me to assume I needed in order to be a legitimate trans person. I felt a little guilty, but also realised it's cishet oppression that makes us feel like transness and trauma must go hand in hand, and to reject the need for such a narrative was an act of radical self-love and radical queer rebellion."*

*For a long time my transness has felt so entirely my own, so personal, like the way I sing or the words I write. It is only lately that I have felt like people – WOMEN, self-proclaimed FEMINISTS no less – have walked into my home and taken this part of me and begun discussing and dissecting it. Deciding how much merit or validity there is to something that Is Not Theirs.*

*It has reached the point of women I have known since I was a child...telling me what gender I am, asking about my genitals. Women in the streets accusing me of supporting abuse of women for trying to explain that trans people just want to exist.*

*I now fear and doubt every gendered interaction (which, let's face it, is every interaction in our society), wondering if the invalidation I feel is the result of ignorance or malice. I simultaneously feel the need to preempt any assumptions to reduce the likelihood of invalidation, and yet also feel like doing so is putting a target on my own back – for trans people asking to be seen is asking to be challenged.*

*Congratulations to me I guess, looks like I have a trans trauma narrative now. Awesome."*

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## Seen change

*Rotterdam* is a queer play but not for queer audiences, says **Liam Rees**

**Near the beginning of *Rotterdam* one of the characters says something along the lines of: don't be polite – be honest. And in my honest opinion *Rotterdam* is a play about queerness, but it is not for queer people. By all means, I'd send my well-intentioned parents to see it for a lesson in 'What Not To Do When Someone You Love Comes Out As Trans' but anyone questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation should avoid it with a ten-foot pole.**

Briefly, Alice and Fiona have been together for 7 years, Alice is on the verge of coming out to her parents until she discovers that Fiona is trans and wants to start living as Adrian. A great setup for a complex exploration of queer identities and

relationships with a deeply disappointing result. However, as a gay cis man I don't feel like the right person to untangle the script's problematic exploration of queerness. Additionally, we're at the National Student Drama Festival – the focus should be Nottingham New Theatre's production rather than an analysis of an established playwright's script.

The company do a decent job with some astoundingly clunky dialogue, Maddy Strauss as Alice proves to be a particularly convincing anxious and socially awkward disaster lesbian. Lara Cowler brings deft details to their performance as Fiona/Adrian with their physicality subtly shifting throughout the evening as the hormone treatment progresses.

It's unfortunate that the staging limits the actors' potential – unnecessarily long black-outs kill the pace and force the actors to build up the atmosphere from scratch in each scene. Additionally with a script so laden with exposition – where is the play set again? *Rotterdam*? Oh you moved here to *Rotterdam*? Yes, I love it here in *Rotterdam*! – the audience doesn't need a visual cue from the projection to spell it all out for us.

In the end, I'm not sure what *Rotterdam* (both the script and this production) adds to the conversation. At NSDF I'm not sure who it's meant to be for.

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# A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing



## You and I

Sometimes it feels like the past is rushing past; by  
Marina Johnson

## Feeling unfeeling

*A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is a difficult watch for **Lucy Thompson**

**Do I owe this play anything? An emotional response? I'm not going to give it.**

*A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* asks a lot of its audience. Obviously. The novel on which this play is based is deeply challenging and intense. The thing with reading is – it's more controllable. It's also more intimate (again, obviously). I love stream-of-consciousness texts because you see with that character's eyes and you experience their manipulation of narrative. Onstage, first person means you see another body speak those experiences. So reading takes you closer, but you can also stop it. Fold the page down and go away and come back.

Performances are live. They are not, for the audience, stoppable. I couldn't go away and come back to *Girl*... To be fair I didn't want to; not that I actively wanted to stay, I just didn't actively want to leave.

This production seemed to want to tap into emotional recesses because its subject matter is so painful and dark and...

Sexual violence. Violence by yourself against yourself. Sex. Violence.

It's themes that...That I have no interest in allowing to reach me.

So I don't really have any feelings about *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*.

I could talk about the design. That was good. NNT do a great job of shrinking the space down so it can be filled by Kate O'Gorman as the girl – who does a wonderful job. The rubber crumb covering the stage is a throwback to the 2014-2016 Corn Exchange production, except NNT use a whole lot more. It adds a new and interesting (literal) texture to the piece and very much grounded the girl in her rural setting. I did spend a lot of time watching her bury her feet in the crumbs. Later in the piece, the lightbulbs and haze create some arresting visuals. There were moments, when the girl was lying in the forest and when she was looking up at the lake above her, which were purely beautiful.

During *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, being sat in

the inner ring of white dinner chairs made me conscious of perhaps being part of the spectacle. If I'd sat in one of the traditional traverse seats, I certainly would've been looking at those audience members for their responses. I'm not sure what this added to the performance. Did it distract from the girl? Or did it give the girl more to feed on from the audience? An empty family environment around her would have spoken volumes.

I also felt curiously disconnected from the play because it was narrated, without other interjected voices, entirely by the girl. Hear me out: McBride's novel raises questions of agency and powerlessness because so much is done to the girl. In performance, when the girl delivers all lines and impersonates everyone, she inherently always has a measure of control over the situation. I'd have been interested to see a production which experimented with sound, with the voices of her mother, brother, and uncle. Would it have made her feel more or less isolated?



# Unrequited love

**Joseph Winer** stands on his own in the dark (with a double rum and coke)

**We've been talking a lot about authenticity at the festival this year. About who has a right to speak the words of other people. When it comes to autobiographical theatre, we often assume that the performer is speaking their own story. In *Standing Too Close On Our Own In The Dark*, Jake Chamberlain starts off by telling us that the show is very self-indulgent: mostly just him sipping water and reading out extracts from his diary.**

And he doesn't disappoint with this claim. He does very much go on to be self-indulgent for an hour as he whines about young love, the story interspersed with songs performed by Jake Marsden and Jamie Nowell. But the autobiography of this setup turns out to be deceitful. It took me completely by surprise to discover that the text has actually been written completely by Marsden.

I can't be too annoyed, surely? It is theatre I suppose, and we know that theatre is generally

fictional. But the setup of this in the construct of the gig seems to alter the way I perceive the storytelling. I've had conversations with people who have argued that this is not theatre. That it's closer to spoken word, a genre which generally uses non-fiction in its content. But I like to be of the belief that performance, as a rule, can categorise itself however it chooses.

Putting form aside, the story we're told is hardly new or revolutionary. A boy falls in love with a girl. He dreads meeting her dad. She has to move back to America. He may never love again. We've heard this story so many times before. That's not to say that these feelings of hopelessness-in-love aren't valid for anyone who experiences them, but why make another piece of theatre about it? This story isn't captivating. I don't relate to this character. His flaws aren't interesting enough to engage with. And maybe that's just me? Maybe this isn't a show for me.

He comes towards the end of a section and looks down. I think this is supposed to be so we

can take a breath and reflect on the situation. But this gesture depends on a development of sympathy from the audience, and I just don't think the script offers much opportunity for this. He talks briefly about loneliness, about dependence on alcohol, but these don't become much of a focus. The girl he's in love with isn't described with much detail. She hardly feels like a real person.

I stand at the back of the performance space, drink in hand, and lean. The music is pleasant. But it doesn't take me emotionally. That might just be me. I don't think music speaks to me in the same way that spoken word does. The lyrics become diluted in the air, practically evaporating in the warming vapours of beer. They don't hit me. The stakes never rise. And the whole thing is nothing more than mildly pleasant, albeit performed with a highly convincing embodiment of the text by Chamberlain.

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## Heavy and oddly light

**Grace Patrick** is puzzled by the contradictions in *Rotterdam*

**While I was watching *Rotterdam*, I became aware of a growing sense that this isn't fair. It's not fair that people have to struggle with their identity in any way and that it frequently brings moments of pain, but more than that it's not fair to frame these struggles as a soap opera hypothetical in which they're relegated to little more than a plot device.**

There were quite a few things that I struggled with regarding the tone taken by the play, which often seems to skip unpredictably between the solemn and the oddly light, before jumping back again. I absolutely believe that serious stories can be told without getting stuck in a verbal pit of despair, but the atmospheric shifts often felt unjustified. It's generally going for naturalism, and jumps like that just don't happen in real life because people tend to take the life changing experiences of their loved ones seriously.

This problem existed in the opposite direction as well, with conversations descending into

screaming arguments uncomfortably swiftly. In part, I think this issue stemmed from the fact that the play takes place over the course of several months, but the passage of time wasn't at all easy to keep up with. The (excessively) drawn out scene changes gave it an episodic feeling, but there were few clues as to how and when significant periods of time were passing. Because of that, the evolution of Adrian and Alice's relationship felt unnaturally quick, and therefore the moments of strong emotion felt unearned. The actors were working hard and going well with what they had, but they often seemed as if they were fighting against the script. On top of that, the clash between the partially realistic and partially representative set rendered the concept tricky to follow.

One line of conversation that I found interesting in this play was about agency in relation to self-identity. A theme appears to be people threatening the right of others to determine how they identify and who they tell, and how an individual can uphold their own identity while

respecting other people at the same time. The strongest scene in the piece was a moment of proper conversation between the two brothers. It felt to me like this was where the play got closest to really digging into its subject matter without getting lost in conflict. Equally, some of the exploration of the generational differences in attitudes to coming out was interesting and in places pertinent, but often felt brushed over in favour of focusing on the dramatics that it was made to lead to.

Really, *Rotterdam* seemed to me like a clunky and heavy exploration of some nuanced and delicate subjects. It didn't do them justice and it didn't communicate the many layers of complications sufficiently, and this absence left the play feeling hollow and inconclusive. Perhaps this is because there are no immediate answers, but surely it would be better to acknowledge this ambiguity than to attempt to shoehorn a happy ending.

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# Horoscopes

Your NSDF horoscope, courtesy of the mystic **Marina Johnson**

## Aries

You will get lost looking for your next show's venue. 'Where is Curve 2?', you say to yourself and you walk around and around and around the circular building. It is not on the second floor. You will learn this too late.

## Taurus

You walk out of a show that had literally changed your life. You walk into another show that make you will question why you ever attend the theatre.

## Gemini

You will make a shortlist of workshops that you want to go to. They are all on at the same time. You make another list. They are all filled up. You go to a workshop. Some time later you come out – changed.

## Cancer

You will stare longingly at the vegan blueberry croissant in Curve cafe. How can one piece of patisserie promise so much? How can it possibly ever be as glorious as its label suggests? Surely if you purchase such an item it will never fulfil the preconceptions you have built around it. It will only let you down.

## Leo

You will have your first piece of fruit in days. You will want to weep. Weep. Catharsis is good.

## Virgo

After some intense eye contact with a tall dark stranger across the Festival Company, you will both reach for the pen at the same time. The future is yours, continue this conversation at the bar.

## Libra

You will see someone you know. You KNOW you know them. You have seen their face before. They greet you as a friend, you chat. You cannot remember their name. It is not too late. Ask.

## Scorpio

You will fall in love with a fictional character you meet in a performance. There is nothing to offer but solace.

## Sagittarius

You see a place to sit that is not a chair. It may be a table, it may be a window, it may be the wall. If you fit, you sit.

## Capricorn

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a baby Source 4. There is a light, you have found it. You have been looking for this box for 30 minutes. Cradle the baby Source 4. Hush little baby.

## Aquarius

You will have so many ideas of things you want to write to for *Noises Off*. You will stare at your notebook. Feeling like the English language has fallen out your ear. Pick it up off the floor and push though.

## Pisces

You will spend the day stage-dooring Simon Stephens. Each time you pluck up the courage to speak to him, you will get distracted by his hair. Is it dyed? What product does he use? And someone will take your spot.

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## Meme of the day



I prefer the original  
National Treasure

I said the original

Perfection

technician  
impossible

*Every day of the festival, we scratch our heads and do our best to set the Technical Team an (im) possible challenge. They have 24 hours to complete it, should they choose to accept.*

It's been a dramatic few days, with power cuts and quiz drama. So much to fix in so little time. In light of this (no pun intended) here is your challenge should you choose to accept it:

**Guest Director James Phillips can't be everywhere at once. But with your help maybe he can...**

#5

# NOISES OFF

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