Motortown

Simon Stephen’s Motortown is just the sort of ‘In Yer Face’ theatre that could remind people why seeing plays can be rewarding and provocative and yet as politically sharp as a Dispatches documentary. In this instance the work teeters on the verge of either being all these things or in fact being pointlessly shocking, trashy and for all its overtones of radicalism actually mediocre, banal and at times cringe worthy in its use of politics to disguise poor writing. However, this is just my opinion of Motortown as a play; pleasingly the production more than works because of the humour, skill and confidence of its cast and direction. This was a bad play performed by an excellent, fresh team who were perfectly rehearsed yet effortless in performance.

Our introduction to John Askew’s character, the returned British soldier who turns out to be more than a little disgruntled with the state of affairs in Blighty, takes place when the audience must awkwardly pass him at the Barn’s entrance. From here on in Danny resorts to violence and force to crudely re-enact the life he so desperately wants and the mistreatment of prisoners he missed out on whilst on tour in Basra. Askew consumes and makes an impact on the stage with his physical presence as well as with his psychotic portrayal of a desperate man, his skill went far beyond the limiting caricature the text of the play created. As the play wound on into its strange and messy conclusion Askew managed to hold his own as other characters came and went; a big problem with the restrictive text was that however hard the other cast members worked no character but the protagonist was given enough stage time to become fully realised. Adam Alcock was superb as the ranting and deluded gun modifier Paul and his was the only other character given enough lines to make a real impression. Even Lee, Danny’s brother, felt like a cartoonish portrayal of someone with learning difficulties that could only ever have the semblance of a relationship with his dichotomised squaddie sibling.

The understated, dark settings suited was in contrast to the overstated style of the play; the set was kept simple and focused but unfortunately took a mysteriously long time to move in the blackouts between scenes that I can only assume will improve with practice. The crescendo of Danny’s violence and misanthropy, when he abducts and murders a fourteen year old girl, was emotionally and convincingly acted; the sight of Georgia Bird held by fear to the floor was so uncomfortable and so drawn out the audience began looking for the re-emergence of the murderous Danny instead. Bird added a reality with her performance that made this violent and ridiculous scene work, were it not for her skill this would have been unbearable.
I disagree

Simon Stephens 4 stars? I think not. Trying to be ‘Down’ by cramming as much shocking material into a play as possible...