

So I'm sitting in a theatre auditorium and it's dark. The stage is empty. Gradually I notice a line of 8 performers emerging very slowly from the darkness at the back of the stage – it takes what seems like an age (which is probably 5 minutes) for them to arrive at the front of the stage, by which time rousing music has begun to play. Staring straight at us they then change their clothes, which takes about another 10 minutes. After that they deliver a long poetic text, *The Hollow Men* by TS Elliot, one word each, before moving back into the middle of the stage and, following some more curious and extended choreographies, they end up running wildly, half dressed, paint soaked, round the stage to a demonic beat and their own added vocals. And then they stop. And clean up. And look at us again, sheepishly this time, before it ends. An hour has passed.

Now of course that is only a brief outline. There is an awful lot of detail missing – about the text, the costume, the very different performers, the music, the extended choreographies, the single hanging strip light used towards the end. And it doesn't tell the story of being there, of being effected by the mood of the rest of the audience, of placing the experience in the context of what had happened before, how my day had been, who I was with, what my plans were for the rest of the evening. There was a lot going on in this piece, a lot on stage and a lot in my head.

In general the audience response was very positive, though not entirely. According to the feedback it was 'loved' much more often than it was 'hated', it was 'amazing' and apparently *because* of its 'anarchic contempt for its audience'. And people are still talking about it - it's clear it had a real impact. It was called *For Thine* by Sanne van Rijn and Johnny's Horse, a new performance company from Utrecht in Holland, and it was presented at the Flare International Festival of New Theatre in 2015.

Now I chose this piece. I had the responsibility, and the privilege, and the pressure, of being the curator, being the one who has to find the work and decide what is an experience of value for an audience at a festival of emerging experimental theatre here in Manchester. My job was/is to chose good work, whatever we mean by that, by new artists, and work that's doing something new and challenging with what a theatre experience could and should be.

And I liked its confidence and its control. I liked how enigmatic it was, how it offered up possibilities of meaning, how it played with it's relationship to us watching. I liked its dynamic range, from protracted stillness and silence to chaotic abandon and physical release. I liked the position of the one section of text, and the *uncertainty* with which it offered an intellectual framework for the experience. And I liked the fact that I had never experienced anything quite like it before.

I knew it was challenging, and a few people did walk out. There was something about the apparent self indulgence, about the contract it offered, the variable extent to which it seemed to care about it's audience, what it did with duration, how much time it gave us to wonder what the heck was going on, wonder what it was offering us, beyond the stimulation to do all this wondering.

I've spent some of the slowest minutes and hours of my life sat in theatre auditoria - I'm really not someone with endless patience. I've also spent some of the quickest minutes and hours of my life in theatres, not aware of the time flying by, and to be honest I think I prefer somewhere in the middle, which is what this piece offered. There's a freedom in the best theatre experiences for me as an audience, freedom to respond as you want, freedom to follow the tangents and avenues that you find most interesting, that emanate from the carefully crafted stimulus on stage.

The best theatre experiences for me respect our engagement with what's on offer, they stimulate thinking and give time for that thinking to happen, they know this is a real experience of being in a room with some real performers, really doing things, framed by our understanding and experience of the world out there, and that that might take some processing. And they know that being an audience is a subject in itself, something we need to think a lot about as we sit there, particularly as so much of our life experience these days is spent being an audience, to the material put up for us to 'enjoy', on our screens and our digital technology.

As theatre makers and producers and curators in this country I think we have a cultural and artistic responsibility as much as a social one, to offer audiences experiences outside of the apparent comfort zone of narrative drama, and to re-energise theatre as an art-form, to properly access its potential as a unique, live, art encounter, here, in the UK in 2017.