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600 People

Alexander Kelly

Third Angel

The Studio, York Theatre Royal

21 September 2017

Sometimes you need a reminder to look up and wonder. Alexander Kelly's one-man show did just that for me: in a world seemingly reeling from climate change, nuclear threat and general anger, Kelly encourages us to take a longer view.

Unfathomably, millennially long, in fact. Kelly's piece has been brewing since 2006, fuelled by a series of conversations with Simon Goodwin, a professor of theoretical astrophysics at the University of Sheffield. The Third Angel co-founder was interested in the Search For Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, SETI, but found that Goodwin's enthusiasm and breadth of knowledge led them into expanding vistas of human (and other) experience.

So we are plunged into thinking about scales unimaginable to the human mind. Into the phenomenal reaches of deep space, to the infinitesimal flukes that have kept homo sapiens alive, to the inky black of the time that preceded our brief existence, and into the minutiae of genetic modification by CRISPR technology. And, apologies if this sounds somewhat click-bait, but the explanation of why the show is called *600 People* blew my mind.

Kelly is a genial host for this hour-long piece. Billed as a 'performance-lecture', it's definitely heavier on the lecture, so don't go expecting a theatrical re-enactment of DNA sequencing or a physical theatre embodiment of a spacecraft. The talk is supported by clear, often humorous *Hitchhiker's Guide*-esque imagery by Daniel Fletcher, the odd sound cue, and some judicious use of a few props. The direction, by Third Angel co-founder Rachael Walton, keeps subtly varying the tone so one's attention never drifts.

Occasionally prompted by cue cards, but mostly just speaking directly to us with a simple ease, Kelly makes these infinite concepts seem within our grasp and shares his passionate and long-lived interest in space exploration.

What comes through most of all is a thirst for knowledge: a hunger to learn where we are situated in time and space and to understand the likelihood of there being, as they say, "anybody out there". With a central strand examining the contents of the Voyager spacecraft, the talk also contains a rich thread of poetic melancholy. Kelly touches on both the optimism and the deep sadnesses of this piece of 1970s technology, relentlessly speeding away from us, its sensors slowly switching off to conserve its little remaining power. And its creators, closing in on retirement age, back on earth, still sanguinely monitoring Voyager's progress ever further away from home as they also inch closer to their own death.

En route we learn about dolphin murder, the Fermi paradox, cyborgs and Homo Floresiensis. The inquisitive and acquisitive nature of Kelly's intellect means that we end up with a grab-bag of

knowledge niblets—no bad thing. *600 People* might not link together with the completion of a narrative piece, but it's all connected via the thrill of learning and imparting knowledge, and of looking outwards from ourselves into the great, wide, probably lifeless but maybe—just maybe—inhabited universe.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)