

British Theatre Guide

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1984

George Orwell, adapted by Matthew Dunster
Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester
(2010)

Matthew Dunster has assembled a main cast of ten, seven performing arts students in minor roles and crowd scenes, an army of volunteer actors sharing the roles of prisoners and six children sharing two child characters, plus an army of stage hands to bring on and off a constant stream of large props and items of scenery for George Orwell's seminal dystopian fantasy which he has adapted and directed for Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre.

In this hugely-influential mid-twentieth century political novel, Winston Smith is a dangerous person to be a citizen in a totalitarian state, as he thinks for himself, questions the 'news' constantly fed to them on the ever-present screens that also allow the authorities to monitor them and has ambitions to be an individual rather than just an obedient cog in the party's machine. When he meets much younger Julia and they begin an illegal sexual relationship, they both commit to joining the resistance and informing the public that they are being manipulated and deceived, but the authorities catch up with them and begin a process of 'correcting' their views and their memories.

In many ways this is a period piece, and not just because the year in the distant future used for the title is now more than two and a half decades in the past. Orwell was incredibly prescient in his critique of the direction that Soviet Communism was taking in this and in *Animal Farm* at a time when the full horrors of Stalin's regime (and others in the Soviet Union) were not to be fully revealed for more than a decade, but this is now old news to us. Even the dystopian style that the novel began now seems commonplace and perhaps even a little old-fashioned. However the concepts of Room 101 and Big Brother still have the power to leave behind their light entertainment trivialisations and attempts to compare security cameras in our streets with constant observation in your own home by the police still have the power to shock, as do other brilliantly-conceived and frighteningly-plausible ideas to control how people think such as doublethink and newspeak.

Dunster's production looks big and expensive with lots of people and objects constantly moving on and off the narrow, raised stage platform like a runway, which at times feels rather like sitting beside a busy road watching the traffic. Whilst the organisation and movement is undoubtedly slick and praise is due to the stage management team for making it all work, whether it adds much to the production is open to question.

After a lot of confusing to-ing and fro-ing, the romantic story between Winston and Julia begins, and this is nicely done and is something that can draw the audience in and gain their empathy. However in the second half which had a noticeably smaller audience than before the interval it all becomes very bitty again, with many different styles of delivery. The figure of the resistance, Goldstein, delivers a lecture about their society which Paul Moriarty does superbly and very naturally, but it goes on and on until even those spectators with the strongest attention spans must have wandered. The illustrations of his speech with stylised actions from the ensemble seem more

a vain attempt to stop the audience drifting off rather than adding anything to the points he is making.

The cell that Smith is kept in looks superb as it opens up out of the floor with its white tiles and harsh lighting, but then we get a sequence of unrelated bits of scenes involving different characters with so little substance that the actors are left to fall back on unrestrained emoting before the next character in the queue comes and does their little bit. In fact queues are something the production does very well, as there are many parts where a couple of ensemble members or stage hands queue up at the side of the stage for someone to come off, go on for a few seconds and then tramp off to allow the next couple to come on. The rest of the prison scene consists mostly of overlong political discussions plus the torture scenes which, like other violence in the play, is choreographed well by fight director Kate Waters but not performed with enough conviction to be remotely convincing.

There are some very strong central performances from Jonathan McGuinness with his George Orwell haircut as the rather passive rebel Winston Smith and new acting graduate Caroline Bartleet as Julia. Matthew Flynn creates a strong character as O'Brien and there are great moments from most of the others, but they rarely get enough substance in the short, broken-up scenes to really shine. Paul Wills has had a huge job to design the sets for this play, which all look great and have a consistent style that works well with the story and the production.

There are parts that work well and give a glimpse of an adaptation that could be good if not great, but they are swamped by lots of confusing and unnecessary movement, overlong speeches and discussions that betray their literary origins but translate poorly to drama. If the intention is to give a taste of the monotony of life in the world of 1984 and Smith's inability to tell whether he'd been in prison for days, weeks or months then perhaps it has succeeded, as three hours of watching this play seemed so very much longer than three hours of the wonderful previous production of [*Raisin In The Sun*](#) in this same theatre.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)