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A Manchester Anthem

Nick Dawkins

Cloudburst Productions Ltd

Hope Mill Theatre

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This play, written by Nick Dawkins as a present for his actor flatmate Tom Claxton's 22nd birthday almost seven years ago is, I believe, making its Manchester debut at Hope Mill, having premièred at VAULT Festival in London in 2023 before moving up to the Edinburgh Fringe. It heads back down south, to London's Riverside Studios, after this brief run in its titular city.

But then it isn't really about Manchester, despite a soundtrack featuring the likes of The Stone Roses, The Smiths and 808 State in Sam Baxter's sound design and logos from Affleck's Palace, The Hacienda and the now ubiquitous Manchester bee embedded in Anna Niamh Gorman's set. It's about class consciousness with a bit of family trauma thrown in that could be set anywhere where the working classes rub against the affluent and at any time since public funding allowed the less-well-off to attend university after the Second World War.

Tommy is to be the first in his family and in his street to go to university and is celebrating his last night at home before heading off—to Oxford, no less. He is from a one-parent family, his mother a nurse, but he actually went to a private school on a scholarship. He's planning on hitting the town with his mates, but before he finishes work in the coffee shop, in come a couple he knew at school, Angus and Sharon, who he says have always looked down on the likes of him. However, they are a lot more friendly than he leads us to expect; Angus gives him a large tip and invites him to a few drinks at his huge house with a few others who will also be going to Oxford.

In fact, everyone we meet in the play is nice and welcoming to Tommy (or "Thomas" as Angus calls him) and no one offers any kind of threat to him—apart from Tommy himself. The rich soon-to-be students are welcoming, his mates are happy for his success in getting into Oxford and encourage him to go to Angus's do, his estranged father does his best to help in a difficult situation and his mother tries to cheer him up with the "Anthem" of the title—which turns out to be a 1990 song from Essex band N-Joi that she loved when she was pregnant with him.

All of the things that go wrong during the evening—as inevitably they will in this kind of story—are instigated by Tommy himself. After a few drinks, he is emboldened to move on to something he rejected when he was more sober, and what follows comes partly as a result of how that changes his behaviour.

But that isn't the whole story. Towards the end, he says to his mother, "I don't wanna go and come back as someone else." This perhaps explains his behaviour later on: an anxiety about losing his class roots perhaps—although he had already attended public school—but also a fear and rejection of the inevitability of change, and of leaving your current self behind.

Dawkins's script, as directed for this revival by Izzy Edwards (originally by Charlie Norburn), is full of pace and wit and touches on many issues but doesn't really bring them all together and leaves a lot of loose ends—while it doesn't have to explain everything for the audience, a bit more tying together would have given it more depth.

But it is certainly an entertaining hour in the company of a likeable character whom we want to succeed, despite his flaws, performed impressively and with gusto by Claxton, who also portrays a wealth of other characters in the story clearly and distinctly.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)