

British Theatre Guide

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Beyond the Fence

Benjamin Till, Nathan Taylor and many computers

Sky Arts and Wingspan Theatricals

Arts Theatre

22 February–5 March 2016

On Saturday 27 February, thousands marched against the Trident nuclear weapons in central London. When they reached Trafalgar Square, they heard speeches from the leaders of the two main opposition parties in Parliament.

This gave a topicality to the new musical *Beyond the Fence* being performed in the nearby Arts Theatre. It takes as its subject the 1980s struggle of women against the location of cruise nuclear missiles at Greenham Common in Berkshire.

The musical is also an experiment to see what kind of contribution can be made by computers after they have statistically analysing musical 'hits' and 'flops'.

A computer system named ProperWryter generated the basic plot. The Cloud Lyricist contributed 25% of the lyrics, and a program they called Android Lloyd Webber produced dozens of show tunes a minute from which a human team selected what they refer to as the 'best melodic gems'.

Computers have not had a particularly good record of prediction. They failed to predict the financial crisis of 2008 and the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party in 2015 but maybe they will fare better if applied to the theatre.

We can guess that by looking at what went before they would not have predicted the success of Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. We can also bet they would produce a formula that looks more like Andrew Lloyd Webber than Stephen Sondheim.

The show is set outside the fence at the Greenham Common air force base. Clothes and placards hang from trees and parts of the fence. The placards declare slogans such as 'Welfare not Warfare' and 'Cruise Convoys Convey Death.'

The women mount a series of protests from holding picnics inside the base to shining light from mirrors into the security cameras. All of this demonstrates how insecure the base actually is.

The story centres on Mary (C J Johnson) and her twelve-year-old daughter George, both of whom have been physically assaulted by Mary's former partner. In reaction to this, George has become mute but her growing friendship with Jim (Ako Mitchell), an American serviceman at the base, begins to rebuild her trust and willingness to communicate.

There are some things to like about this show from its choice for the musical of the Greenham struggle to Tom Rogers's imaginative set. The acting is always warm, engaging and well delivered. Ako Mitchell as the charming and gentle Jim is particularly effective at creating a presence with just a look or a gesture.

Unfortunately, the show has a lot of problems that even the most talented cast would find it difficult to solve.

The plot is narrowly focused on the simple strand of the friendship between George and Jim. It is easy to predict what will happen and its execution is flawed. Like much of the show, it is overly sentimental and some of what happens is very unlikely. For instance, we are expected to believe that in practically their first encounter, Jim will tell the mute child about the death of his wife and child.

The characters tend to be stereotypes. With the exception of Jim, the soldiers and police are cartoon villains who spend their time assaulting the women.

The women characters are given more to say but still seem to fall into types. Among them are the older mother figure, the angry young black woman and the sex-obsessed Welsh woman.

Most of the songs seem to be unmemorable attempts to create rock anthems which sound very familiar. The lyrics do little more than express in music what we have already seen happen, adding nothing to the plot, character or the politics. Typical is the song "What's the Point" which followed a discussion among the women about the point of the struggle, and in music it said nothing more than that.

By this time in the musical, many of the audience might as well have sung along as they wondered the point of the musical. It is a missed opportunity to say something about an important historical event and to give a talented cast decent material to perform.

Reviewer: [Keith Mckenna](#)