

# British Theatre Guide

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## Bouncers

John Godber (adapted and updated by Maurice Bessman)

Boisterous Theatre Company

Royal Court, Liverpool

31 August–15 September 2018

John Godber's *Bouncers*, first produced in 1984, was once described as "not so much a play, more a social phenomenon", and featured in the National Theatre's NT2000 list of significant plays of the twentieth century. As a piece, it has, in common with Dylan Thomas's 'play for voices', *Under Milk Wood*, the lack of a dramatic story, being instead a (sometimes poetic) rendering of a single night in clubland. To describe it as theatre aimed at people who might not normally go to the theatre would be neither unfair nor uncomplimentary.

Maurice Bessman's adaptation uproots and transports Pontefract 1984 to Liverpool 2018(-ish). The success of the production (and it is, largely, successful) hangs on unflagging energy of the cast and the renewed capacity of the text to speak to a diverse Liverpoolian constituency. In this, their first production (upgrading from a sellout studio show), Boisterous Theatre Company fully lives up to its name and, judging from the closing ovation, tonight's crowd really gets it.

Director Miriam Mussa (with extremely able assistance from cast member and movement director Zain Salim) wrings gallons of energy and inventiveness from the four actors, who sing, dance, bump, grind, mince and wrestle their way through two hours plus of showtime.

Four 'Door Supervisors' stand resolutely waiting for Saturday night to take off. The quiet start to the night allows tensions to bubble up between Judd (Mutt Burman) and Lucky Eric (Joe Speare). Eric is the elder of the group—is he too old to continue in this line of work? This question signals a kind of jostling for position to be seen in any wolf pack. Grey or not, Eric is one wolf not yet ready to step aside. Les (Michael Horsley) and Ralph (Zain Salim) also flex their muscles and trade stories of the previous night.

The action cuts away to local hairdressing salons. Maureen (Speare) who's 'massive', Elaine (Burman) 'lonely', Susie (Salim) 'sexy' and Rosie (Horsley) who's more than half expecting boyfriend Patrick to 'put a ring on it', primp and preen in preparation for night on the town. They agree they're all 'gorje'—even Maureen whose hair catches fire under the dryer. A parallel scene, set in a local gents' hairdressers follows. It's funny stuff and the audience laughs in recognition of familiar posturing and bravado.

An enormous amount of booze is downed before these revellers even get to the club, and not all of them pass the door supervisors' scrutiny. We have been warned us all in advance: "you're not 'tough guys' and you're not 'bad girls'". Woebetide anyone who ignores the warning. The punters' night turns out hard enough for some, without falling foul of the bouncers (sorry, door supervisors).

Poor Rosie's dream of marrying Patrick, the love of her life (well, of the past two days), is shattered when she spots him snogging a 'cougar', "like two throat surgeons checking each other's tonsils".

Distraught, she does what any modern girl would do—posts a defiant group selfie on every available social media platform.

Some of the targets here are easy stereotypes, playing to the crowd—there's almost a cheer when a couple of Hooray Henrys get a damned good kicking in the process of being ejected. But Liverpool is no place for the toffee-nosed and Bessman has quite rightly sussed that *Bouncers* works best as a local play for local people.

Alongside the outrageous and hilarious, there are moments of pathos. These mainly come in Lucky Eric's speeches. In the first, he reflects on the realities of young girls pressed to grow up too soon; the second is a contemplation on the nature and impact of porn (this follows a cleverly enacted flashback to the days of stuttering, skipping, start-stop, dodgy DVDs of the '80s).

Eric's existential crisis (aka, perhaps, growing up) is underdeveloped as a character arc and the audience, whilst no doubt recognising the sense in what he says, has nowhere to take it. Another routine, in which the bouncers (door supervisors) discuss the linguistic contortions of contemporary LGBTQ and BAME discourse, strikes a chord but again is left hanging.

Of course, music plays an essential part and DJ Spycatcha (under the musical direction of the exceptional Tayo Akimbode) maximises the impact of the soundtrack. Fingers and feet are tapping all around the auditorium, along with celebratory whoops whenever a favourite track starts up.

Characteristically, Richard Foxton's design is uncluttered yet effective. Ian Scott's lighting communicates clubland without causing migraines—clever, restrained work.

A few shortcomings aside, *Bouncers* continues to work because it throws an unrelenting set of mirror images back at its audience. Very few here will see nothing of themselves, those they know or have known. Those whose clubbing days are passed and done will think, "we were mad in them days, but we survived", while the younger crowd will say, "yep, that's us, aren't we mad?" It is to be hoped that, having had a taste, at least some of them will be tempted back to the Court (and the city's other venues) for more theatre.

Whether you're seventeen or seventy, get yourself down there. It's boss.

**Reviewer:** [Martin Thomasson](#)