

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## The Censor

Anthony Neilson

Faction Collective

Ustinov Studio, Bath Theatre Royal

(2010)

In November 2008, Welsh writer, poet & film-maker, Patrick Jones hit the headlines when a Christian activist group, Christian Voice, succeeded in shutting down the launch of his collection of poems, *Darkness is Where the Stars Are* in Waterstones, Cardiff. Christian Voice, the vociferous organisation behind the campaign against the BBC's screening of *Jerry Springer the Opera*, regarded Waterstones' decision as "a triumph".

A year later, in September 2009, Jones' own theatre company, South Wales' Faction Collective, elected to stage Anthony Neilson's hard-hitting play, *The Censor*, in Cardiff's Chapter Arts, as a response to the debate this incident had engendered. The company are now performing the play in Bath's Ustinov Studio, to packed houses.

This is a controversial piece in its own right, bound to leave a significant proportion of the audience shifting uneasily in their seats. It's the story of a Miss Fontaine, (Stacey Daly), a female film maker, and her efforts to persuade the Censor (Nathan Sussex) to pass her explicitly pornographic movie for general release. The two enter into a graphic love affair, in which the pair infamously confront the censor's secret fetish.

But this production takes the controversy to a new level. Director Chris Durnall has here elected to screen excerpts from a pornographic film at pertinent moments throughout the play.

It's a decision which has paid off. Yes, some scenes make for uncomfortable viewing, but it undoubtedly serves an interesting function. Running like a mantra through the text, Neilson urges the censor - and the audience - to "look beyond the image", to see the emotional interaction and not simply the sexual one.

The images on screen as the audience walk in - including scenes of a man trickling petals onto a woman's genitals as Nat King Cole croons, "A Blossom Fell" - are at first invasive and distracting. But by the end of the evening, you become aware that the images on screen have become secondary to the relationship that is unfolding on stage between these two. The sex is secondary to the story; what was simply porn has at least been given a context. As an audience, you have been cajoled into seeing beyond the images.

Nevertheless, the director's choices here, more than ever, stand or fail according to the quality of the performances. This is a challenging play and anything less than complete conviction in the characterisations would have the piece descend into seedy titillation.

Sussex excels as the Censor. His repression, his self-censorship, is evident in every nuance of his physicality and in the inflexion of his voice. He steels himself against a world of emotion with which he cannot engage. His interactions with his wife, a quietly commanding performance from Julie

Barclay, are tortured and dysfunctional. Stacey Daly is a captivating Miss Fontaine, striking a perplexing balance between her sophisticated, demure femininity and her strikingly forthright attitude to sex and sexual encounters. They make an affecting ensemble.

There are certainly some difficult and contentious ideas running through the heart of Neilson's text. None more so, for me, than Miss Fontaine's assertion that our nation will not come of age until "every man, woman and child" can sit in any multiplex cinema in the land and watch her film. Art it may be, but it's art for an 18+ audience. I doubt I'm alone in feeling for the censor on this point at least, when he tells her, "I cannot see what you see".

But what this production forces us to confront is that one man's porn is another woman's art; just as one man's raw and provocative poetry is another man's blasphemy. And that these, surely, are the shades of grey that breathe life into our culture?

Censorship may or may not be an exact science but Faction Collective's assured production does what all good theatre should do: raise the important questions. It's up to us to decide on the answers.

**Reviewer:** [Allison Vale](#)