

British Theatre Guide

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Chip Shop Chips

Becky Prestwich

Box of Tricks

The Hub, Salford

17 February–23 March 2016

Apparently, there are around 10,500 specialist fish and chip shops in the UK—when all is said and done, it's our most noteworthy contribution to world cuisine.

Box of Tricks is a relatively young production company, working hard to bring new writing to new audiences. Becky Prestwich's *Chip Shop Chips* is its latest production, now touring mainly non-standard venues.

The setting is Booth and Sons Fish and Chip Restaurant, relaunching after the death of its founder and now in the hands of prodigal son, Eric (Russell Richardson). As well as traditional fare (included in the price of your ticket—veggie option available), Eric wants to boost the experience by offering music, a quiz, a paper hat competition (with prize!) and the opportunity to share your favourite chip memory (in writing, dear reader—you are not going to be dragged up on stage, never fear).

Proceedings have barely begun when two late arrivals—grandmother, Christine, and grumpy granddaughter, Jasmine—enter. From the reactions of Eric and his assistant Lee, it's immediately clear that these two are about to rub salt, vinegar and a dollop of ketchup in old wounds. Eric and Christine have (ancient) history; Jasmine and Lee, a more modern version. All is set for a pescatarian battle, the likes of which we have not seen since our cod-fuelled confrontations with Iceland in the seventies.

The plot is familiar enough: boy meets girl (again), man meets woman (again), painful memories resurface, new understandings are reached. This familiarity, though, is part of the point. Fish and chip shops have been serving up the comforting and familiar since 1860. Nostalgia is very much the flavour of the evening.

As the kindly, sincere Lee, who missed out on his education through no fault of his own, Ben-Ryan Davies wins the audience's affection. His speech about the significance of this job for someone like him is one of the highlights of the evening.

Jasmine (Jessica Forrest in an assured stage debut) is mouthy, clever, a little bit slutty (though not as much as she pretends). Her grandmother chides her for her cynicism—a believable, though not impregnable, wall against the world.

Julie Edwards (Christine) carries much of the emotional weight of the play. Edwards works with determination and poise in what proves to be a technically-challenging venue.

The show is ably pulled together by Russell Richardson's Eric. Richardson has the required warmth and wit to be a likeable, though troubled, host. He is light enough on his feet (literally and

figuratively) to cope with the occasional unscripted input from the audience (all part of the fun). He also has what it takes to retrieve emotional scraps from the bottom of the deep fat fryer, which Prestwich's script ultimately demands of him.

One problem facing productions touring non-standard venues can be how to adapt to the constraints of the situation. In many ways, the Hub is ideal for this show—good size and layout, easily taking on the feel of a genuine fish and chip restaurant.

However, the structure of the script, which intercuts Eric's quiz and competitions with soliloquys from Christine, places an unfair burden on Edwards's shoulders. For one thing, her unamplified voice has to follow on from Eric as MC, using a microphone and PA. For another, while Christine is trying to take us through the agonies of watching her beloved husband succumb to cancer, some members of the audience are caught up discussing paper hat design or how many years a cod might live. In a theatre, house-lights would go down and Christine would be caught in a tight spotlight. Here, Edwards is left to struggle on—with admirable professionalism—against the odds.

Despite this, *Chip Shop Chips* is a successful show. Of those I share a table with, two couples "wouldn't normally go to this kind of thing". If this is repeated across the room, the production is already reaching that Holy Grail of arts funding—the non-theatre-going audience. And they love it. Heading out to the car park, my dining companions are happily chatting about how "wonderful" the evening has been.

All told, *Chip Shop Chips* is comforting fare. The chips are good and the fish delicious. Come along; be well fed and well-entertained. Better than pizza in front of the telly, surely?

By the way, if you re-read this review carefully, it might just give you a head start with the quiz.

Reviewer: [Martin Thomasson](#)