

# British Theatre Guide

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## Double Lives

A double bill by Sean O'Brien and Julia Darling  
Live Theatre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
(2002)

*Double Lives* is a double bill of plays by the two writers in residence at Newcastle's Live Theatre, Sean O'Brien and Julia Darling, specially written for Trevor Fox and Charlie Hardwick.

O'Brien is a poet as well as a playwright, critic and academic, and his play, *From the Underworld*, is poetic in conception, a complex reworking of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, set in the kitchen of the bunker of the ruler of a country which is in the last throes of losing a war. The two onstage characters are a cook (Trevor Fox) and a secretary (Charlie Hardwick) but there are other characters whose presence is felt but who never make an appearance. There is the "old man", the country's ruler; other members of the household (the sound of their drunken revelry is heard frequently); and, of course, there is the enemy, and we hear the sound of their artillery continually.

The parallels with the Hitler bunker are obvious, and there are passing references to sharing of guilt for unnamed killings: Anna says she is only a typist but Thomas reminds her that what she typed were orders for death.

The play charts the changing relationship between the two, which increasingly reflects the Orpheus story. It begins with the radio playing a piece from the Gluck opera, Anna recites the story (or, at least, a version with a happy ending) as she was taught to do as a child at school, and the play ends with them, hand in hand, ascending the steps out of the bunker in a bright golden light.

It doesn't quite come off. The actors seemed a little uneasy with the poetic language, but not, I feel, because of any shortcomings in them or in Jeremy Herrin's direction. The real problem is that this isn't a stage play: the reality of the setting (and of the performances) is too much of a contrast with the language and actually detracts from it. It would work much better as a play for radio, where the audience can concentrate on the words and their imagination can create a mind picture which is more in keeping with the play's soul than any stage set could possibly do.

Julia Darling's *Attachments* is a total contrast. Anaesthetist Davina (Hardwick), in mourning for the sudden death of her partner Michael, is visited by vacuum cleaner salesman Robbie (Fox), who tries to sell her the the latest Platinum Deluxe, recommended to her, he says, by Michael. Cue some very comic scenes.

But the tail twists and twists again, and the humour gets blacker and we, the audience, laugh - and begin to feel just a wee bit ashamed at doing so.

Both actors are clearly more relaxed in their roles here than in O'Brien's play and handle the changes in mood and tempo impeccably. The audience, who had seemed somewhat unsure at the end of *From the Underworld*, responded wholeheartedly and enthusiastically.

*Double Lives* runs until 30th November.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)