

# British Theatre Guide

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## Flat 4

Isabel Songer

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The Kings Arms, Salford

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One of the most frustrating aspects of observing people caught in abusive relationships or addiction is why they continue with their self-destructive behaviour when the negative results are all too apparent.

Alex (author Isabel Songer takes all roles in the production) is in her early twenties but still behaves in a somewhat immature manner, changing universities when she initially struggles to fit in. She gets lucky with her new accommodation, sharing a two-bedroom flat with Becks, with whom she quickly bonds over shared enthusiasms—getting baked while watching *Bake Off* and investigating how 'toasties' can be adapted to match all types of meal.

When Becks is sexually assaulted, however, Alex is unable to go to her aid. Alex has been concealing a massive lack of self-esteem which manifests in an eating disorder and an inability to say "no" to any man who claims to find her slenderness attractive. Having lost her best friend and supporter, Alex must try and extricate herself from her own problems for the first time in her life.

*Flat 4* builds slowly; the opening scene is close to comedic, with Songer relating Alex's misadventures with a wide-eyed enthusiasm. It is an awful thing to say about someone seen for the first time, but the shade of Songer's hair and Alex's golly-gosh attitude is reminiscent of Sarah Ferguson. Although seated, Songer is far from inert, there is an exaggerated, almost cartoonish aspect to her features which suits the giddy tone of the play to that point.

The sudden shift to dark drama is unexpected. It takes time to accept a character who consumes calorie-rich alcohol and junk food as having an eating disorder. Alex's concern about her appearance gains an ominous tone as she critically surveys her slender figure. Songer plays Alex as someone who has been coping with anxiety for years but finds the guilt caused by her condition too much to endure. She is mortified not only at being unable to respond to Becks when she is in need but also by her compulsion to conform to the idealised body image expected of young women.

Alex's mental deterioration is portrayed as guilt-induced self-loathing. She actually asks to be physically hurt by her abusive boyfriend as if considering such suffering is deserved. In one of the more powerful sequences, Alex notices the tone of her laughter has changed to match that of her thuggish boyfriend. Although Alex is an undeniably flawed character, Songer demonstrates how many of her issues are external to her personality—a response to how society puts a high value on appearance and the endless pressure on women to live up to this idealisation.

The rapid pace of the gathering drama is conveyed as Songer moves towards hysteria, rising from her seated position and pacing the stage in agitation. The panic consuming Alex, as she counts

calories and tries to justify then modify her behaviour, is demonstrated by Songer speaking increasingly quickly. As she is not a slow speaker in any case, this increase in speed sometimes causes a lack of clarity.

*Flat 4* examines the corrosive impact of trying to adhere to the perceived ideal body image from a refreshingly new perspective.

**Reviewer:** [David Cunningham](#)