

British Theatre Guide

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Girls

Theresa Ikoko

Talawa Theatre Company, Hightide and Martha Rose Wilson

The Drum, Theatre Royal Plymouth

10–14 October 2017

Girls will be girls.

That is the premise of Alfred Fagon and joint George Devine Award-winner Theresa Ikoko's punchy and gut-wrenching piece deservedly shortlisted for Soho Theatre's Verity Bargate Award.

Clearly BFFs—even if forever may not be quite as anticipated—the young teens discuss Beyoncé and *Big Brother*, snigger over boys and their 'bananas', make fun of their elders and strut their stuff to favourite songs. All very normal and routine.

But not.

Haleema, Ruhab and Tisana are captives. Stolen in a raid on their home town, not knowing whether their families are alive or dead, futures uncertain, the horror of their situation is stamped indelibly on their minds with images of rotting corpses, indiscriminate killings and a baby trampled in the chaotic stampede to escape.

The audience doesn't need to know if their captors are ISIS, Boko Haram or their like—the chilling fact remains that there are frightened and forgotten captives the world over. And, as the backdrop emphasises, out of sight is out of mind. The mundane chitchat of teenagers while held in unspeakable conditions is a stark reminder of just what we are tacitly condoning by ignoring their plight.

The trio is endearing, annoying and very funny with each highly capable actor bringing a superb, finely balanced mix of passion, humour and pathos under tight direction from Elayce Ismail.

Heather Agyepong is a feisty Haleema. She's no one's fool and, armed with a home-hewn shiv, she intends to fight to the death or escape. But Haleema chooses her battles, donning the hijab and reciting prayer, conforming when necessary while sewing SOS messages into black flags.

Wide-eyed Tisana (Yasmin Mwanza) is the baby of the bunch. On the brink of puberty, so safe for now, she endures severe beatings to remain resolute in her faith and escapes into the world of fantasy to survive with hashtags and TV high on the agenda. Meanwhile Yvette Boakye makes the most of the interesting character of Ruhab.

Quickly realising her security lies in marriage, she's out and about presenting her best side for hostage pictures, flirting with the guards and stealing the patrol roster. And she strikes lucky as a fifth wife being treated like a princess by her man. Supposedly.

Richard Hammarton's soundscape swings between terrifying machine gunfire and overhead planes to indistinguishable noises which confuse and distract from the episodic unravelling of our girls'

mundane existence on the edge of reason. And while mentioning confusion... the only criticism would be the curious final scene.

Clever shades of light and darkness make *Girls* highly watchable while delivering a carefully-placed sucker punch.

Reviewer: [Karen Bussell](#)