

British Theatre Guide

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Heads Up

Kieran Hurley

Show and Tell

The Studio, York Theatre Royal

22 February 2018

Plenty has been written and said about Kieran Hurley's award-winning one-man piece *Heads Up* since its [debut at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2016](#). But this disaster-drenched, multi-vocal monologue has lost none of its flowing power, its going-postal force; its controlled rage, humour, craft and beauty.

Hurley, a charming and intense storyteller, sits behind a desk in smart suit and bare feet. He welcomes us to a world which we'll co-habit for a short span—co-creating it, it feels like, as the narratives which soon spill out are peopled by his vivid words and the imaginative leaps he invites us to make, to meet him halfway.

The central way he does this is through the form of the prose, using a *nouveau roman*-esque second-person, involving us as the protagonists in four separate but thematically linked narratives. "You deal in futures," he tells us as we're welcomed into Mercy's world: a financial trader who's resented by her mediocre male colleagues and who spots a blip on the horizon which no broker will ever be able to exploit.

As we meet—or are implicated in—the other central personas of the tale, the lighting shifts subtly and atmospherically, casting long shadows onto the bare back wall. Hurley also triggers samples from a pair of devices on the desk, in a stripped-back, distilled version of his previous show [Beats](#), using lighting, sound and music as a mnemonic to guide us between the worlds described here.

The writing is frequently remarkable and always grippingly perceptive of the turns of phrase which litter our modern life. On the news, France has declared "an extended state of emergency", and a chill goes down your spine at the aptness of the wording. One character, Abdullah, is told to aim for "People-Perfect Behaviour"—or lose his job. Ash feels her teenage body is forced to be "a dumping ground for the anxieties of boys".

There is a "heads up" in the show, in the shape of a warning, but to say too much about its precise form would be to rob its force. It is allusive and imagistic rather than literal-minded. The stories seem to unfold in a shared world, around some clear and present disaster. But what really makes this creation stand out is that Hurley has the bravery and commitment not only to imagine apocalypse but to push through into visions of what comes *afterward*.

Early on in the show, "you are Ash", a young teen who enjoys playing Sim City on emulated old-school hardware. She painstakingly exploits hours of experience to build up a thriving municipality, before clicking, on a whim, on a "natural" disaster: Godzilla goes rampaging through the pixelated town-planning.

It's such a left-field, perfect image for what Hurley is doing here: drawing on shared associations, on forms more ancient even than the SNES, to explore what might really happen in the face of the calamity which we're bringing on ourselves. But Hurley is brave enough, too, to offer hope—if only you would heed the warning signs.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)