

British Theatre Guide

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To Create a Hevvern

Ken Reay and Darren Palmer

Lobster Productions

Carr Ellison Park, Hebburn-on-Tyne

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Theatre is a very broad church, encompassing many sub-genres. We have classical theatre, new writing theatre, avant-gard theatre, total theatre, dance theatre, children's theatre, YPT, comedy, tragedy, melodrama, verbatim theatre, meta-theatre... One could go on and on. Amongst them is what we might call applied theatre, a form which uses theatre to get across a message, in which the message is more important than the medium. In this area we find corporate work, Theatre in Education, even agit-prop, and many actors and directors, particularly in the regions, find themselves involved in one or more of these at some stage in their careers.

To Create a Hevvern is just such a piece. Its aim is to give the people of Hebburn, a small town on the south bank of the Tyne and now part of South Tyneside, a sense of their history and a pride in their town.

Regrettably Hebburn does not have the history of, for instance, its neighbour Jarrow which saw Roman occupation, Bede and his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the last gibbeting in England and the Jarrow Crusade, although Sir Humphrey Davy did design and test the Davy Safety Lamp there and local shipyard Hawthorn Leslie built HMS Kelly, which was captained by Lord Louis Mountbatten.

The programme mentions that the piece is "based on the words of the people of Hebburn" and this forms a large part of the production. So diverse are the "words" that the piece becomes a *pot pourri* of many different topics, from comparisons between life now and in our parents' and grandparents' days, through attitudes to immigration (the writers clearly found many of the attitudes expressed not to their liking, for they bring it up on at least two occasions) and involvement in war (from the Boer War to Afghanistan), to taste in music (a little bit of jive), and many more.

The result is a somewhat wordy piece, which the writers have attempted to break up by creating a number of different scenes (in a pub, a school assembly, fishing by the river, hanging clothes on a washing line) and by the interpolation of songs (Tyneside traditional and the aforementioned Rock 'n' Roll). They also attempt to create links between the various scenes by using a kind of mystical figure, the Road Sweeper, who is a sort of "Wandering Jew", passing down through the ages. However he had more or less vanished by half way through the second act, so that the final four scenes felt disconnected from the rest.

I would have liked more attention paid to costuming. In the washing line scene, for example, three generations, well separated in years across more than a century, appeared together but there was little to identify them in terms of their dress, which left the audience grasping for clues as to when they came from. I was so pleased with myself for recognising the 60s from a reference to twin-tub washing machines that I missed what the character was saying!

The audience of mainly Hebburn people did seem to enjoy it but for those of us who are not from the town, it was the performances which held the attention. Strong performances from a first rate cast (Neil Armstrong, Iain Cunningham, Viktoria Kay, Steven Charles Stobbs and Rachel Teate, playing twenty characters between them, along with students from the Sage Academy in Newcastle) carried the audience along, even when the characters were little more than stereotypes - and, let's be honest, stereotyping is almost inevitable in this kind of theatre.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)