

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

His Greatness

Daniel MacIvor

Rigden Entertainment, Adam Blanshay, Natalie Macaluso, and Ken Denison

The Finborough Theatre

27 April–19 May 2012

Though watching greatness flag can be excruciating, the media's continued focus on fallen celebrity reveals that we're all oddly captivated by failure. Canadian playwright Daniel MacIvor imagines Tennessee Williams's self-destruction in the Finborough's latest production, *His Greatness*, an intermittently absorbing if problematic fictional take on the playwright's last year.

Loosely inspired by Williams's stay in Vancouver for the North American premiere of his lesser play, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, *His Greatness* unfolds in a hotel room with The Playwright (ostensibly Williams) appearing in various alcoholic states ranging from tipsy to pickled. His right hand man and former lover, The Assistant, rushes about trading delicious insults with The Playwright while essentially keeping him on schedule. The plot gains momentum as Williams's date for the play's premiere (a young, "professional" gentleman caller) accompanies the southern icon to the theatre and hangs around for the debauchery to follow.

In terms of performances, the work is uneven. Matthew Marsh, who recently joined the cast due to another performer's illness, is The Playwright. Though his efforts with limited rehearsal time are commendable, in the end, his Williams plays more like a caricature than a three dimensional character. Marsh's southern drawl materializes in an affected sing-song cadence and his performance veers dangerously towards being over-the-top, making his characterization feel outsized in the Finborough's modest space. (In general, *His Greatness* demands a larger venue and feels ill-suited to such an intimate venue.) Nonetheless, in moments when Williams lies hungover in bed and waxes poetic on greatness, Marsh gives us glimmers of the profound sadness defining this once great man in his final years.

As Williams's assistant, Russell Bentley offers a strong, nuanced performance. His portrayal of the dutiful companion (a combination of wife, friend, servant and ex-lover) is delivered with intelligence, wit and an eye to the character's thwarted desires. Scenes between The Assistant and Williams's paid escort (Toby Wharton) are particularly electric; once a boy toy and fledgling actor himself, The Assistant simultaneously longs for the Young Man's attention while resenting his sway over The Playwright.

In the role of The Young Man, Toby Wharton is appropriately cock-sure and charming. At times, though, this young actor struggles to embody the rough edges of a scheming East Coast Canadian hustler, albeit never to the point of distraction.

Though Ché Walker's direction handles the theatre's alley configuration with competence (the playing space has banks of seats on either side), he struggles with other aspects of the production including reigning in Marsh's performance. Walker also shies away from the sexuality inherent in MacIvor's script. In moments featuring sex as the locus of power, particularly a near kiss between

The Assistant and The Young Man, Walker doesn't allow the actors to linger in the danger of their characters' desires and, therefore, robs the audience of this essential tension.

Though MacIvor's script is often delightful, inspiring plenty of laughs thanks to a good deal of witty quips between The Playwright and his entourage, it's not clear what's driving the story. Addiction, self-destruction and the loss of greatness loom large but are ultimately muddled. In the play's final moments, MacIvor brings on The Assistant to deliver a monologue reminiscent of the last speech in Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* (spoken by Tom, a character who could very well be a young, closeted Williams). While a clever conceit, The Assistant's speech rings false; he reminds us that though Williams lived out his days alone and in the depths of an addiction that would ultimately end his life, theatre is still alive and retains its vitality.

Although MacIvor's conclusion is clearly meant to resonate, it plays as a contrived exit strategy.

Reviewer: [Melissa Poll](#)