

British Theatre Guide

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How To Be Immortal

Mira Dovreni

Penny Dreadful Theatre

Brewery Arts Centre

1 March 2014

A fascinating and instructive piece on medical science and personal relationships from a talented writer and cast.

The striking Anna-Helena McLean welcomed the audience with her cello and voice on an open stage and then introduced us to her cello, made with love by her father, an instrument maker. Her family and her home area are built into her instrument.

Two complementary true stories are intertwined in this first full-length play by the artistic director of Penny Dreadful Theatre, Mira Dovreni.

The first story is that of Henrietta Lacks, a poor, black mother who died of cancer in 1951. Henrietta may be dead but her body cells are still very much alive and continue to be used in medical research worldwide. The cells go by the name of HeLa.

No permission was sought and the family were ignored for too many years by the medical world. This was their story, told through Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's daughter. Henrietta Lacks is truly immortal.

The second string is the poignant love story of Mick and Rosa, painter and decorator and musician, who meet when Rosa brings in the happy-go-lucky Mick to damp-proof and paint her bathroom. Chalk and cheese, they fall in love, Mick contracts cancer and soon after their daughter is born he dies.

So far, so easy. The delight of this piece is opening out its DNA: two stories, winding and tangling around each other, flashbacks and early TV science broadcasts by the research surgeon George Otto Gey who developed the immortal cell line, HeLa, from Henrietta's cancer cells. The story of Rosa's desolation and isolation after Mick's death. The creation of a concerto for cello by Rosa from the transposition of Micks chromosome sequence into musical notation and mixing in with Micks musical taste. I look forward to more from this writer.

How To Be Immortal has all the freshness of a Mike Leigh improvisation, great pace and superb performances from the cast of three. The setting is deceptively simple; the backdrop of drawers and screens is used to great effect.

This is bright and intelligent theatre.

The cast, John McKeever, Anna-Helena McLean and Clare Perkins are superb, the simple and effective set by Angela Simpson plus the lighting and projection make the complete package.

Reviewer: [Denis W McGeary](#)