

British Theatre Guide

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Meek

Penelope Skinner

Headlong and Birmingham Repertory Theatre

The Lowry, Salford

19–22 September 2018

According to the old joke the *Meek* shall inherit the earth—if that's okay with everyone else. The future imagined by author Penelope Skinner is so bleak it makes one wonder if anyone would want to inherit the planet.

The set designed by Max Jones—dark grey blocks with a neon crucifix embedded—could be a faded trendy church from the 1970s. Actually it is a gaol cell. After an unspecified war society has reformed into a patriarchal regime which, as part of their old-testament beliefs, has repressed the rights of women. Munitions worker Irene (Shvorne Marks) aspires to be a songwriter but as one of her songs is deemed to be offensive to the regime she is arrested for a capital crime. Ironically Irene's trial makes her song available to a wider audience than ever and exposes the regime to unexpected criticism.

Meek follows in the path of works like *The Crucible* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. But Arthur Miller and Margaret Atwood speculated about the past and the future as a means of commenting upon specific events in American culture—the McCarthy communist trials and social, political, and religious trends of the 1980s. Penelope Skinner, on the other hand, tries to suggest that events in *Meek* could happen anywhere by not specifying the country in which the play is set. This vague approach weakens the political impact of the play and it is hard to determine the point the author is trying to make. It is difficult to accept the events could occur in the UK as no mention is made of what happened to the religions that do not follow fundamentalist Christian beliefs.

Linking the repression of women specifically to religion prevents *Meek* from working as a comment on, say, the inequitable treatment of women in the workplace which is more secular in nature.

The non-political aspects of the play are also disappointing. It is easy to work out the identity of Irene's lover and, hence, her betrayer at an early stage.

In the absence of a clear political context, director Amy Hodge and the cast explore the way in which individuals cope with totalitarianism. The lack of tolerance shown by the regime allows minor events to have a disproportionate impact. So a songwriter no-one has heard of can become an inspirational figure by accident. There is a hint of the current obsession with celebrities as Shvorne Marks shows Irene being seduced by her sudden unexpected popularity before being humbled by her unwanted role as a potential martyr.

The hysteria bubbling under the surface of a repressed society is apparent in Scarlett Brookes's tormented performance as Irene's friend Anna whose response to stress is to fall to her knees reciting prayers at a pace so rapid as to be unintelligible.

Meek features fine acting but the lack of a credible political context makes it hard to accept that the events depicted could happen in the UK or are already happening in a subtler form.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)