

British Theatre Guide

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Morale Is High (Since We Gave Up Hope)

Powder Keg

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PUSH festival (HOME) at the Anthony Burgess Foundation

16–18 January 2017

The winners of the 2016 Hodgkiss Award from the Royal Exchange, Manchester's Powder Keg aim to present theatre which “combines pop and politics to tell stories”.

Two of the collective's five members, Jake Walton and Ross McCaffrey, here take to the exposed-brickwork cavern of the Anthony Burgess Institute to weave these elements together in a piece about the current political moment. Or the future. Or a moment ever so slightly in the past.

The performance is made up of storytelling—both first and third person—and banter between the affable pair, presenting versions of themselves in a version of here and now. Ross is worried about the future. So he goes there, returning with proof in the form of the sparkly jacket he brings back from future-Primark and tales of gatecrashing the future Prime Minister's gaff. Jake doesn't really follow politics, but it's hard not to see stories of Syria, of hate crimes, of axed benefits, as he scrolls through his social media feeds.

Oh, and they both play guitar on an ultra-low-fi set of songs, not quite amped enough to be punk but a bit too blunt to be Bragg. Some of the lyrics are skilfully turned and beautifully delivered; some are screamed and slightly twee.

In a similar way, the whole performance hovers between craft and DIY, between certainty and failure. This is not necessarily to its detriment: the balance feels just right for a group of people unsure of what their defining characteristic really is, and trying to tackle how *not* to simply “give up hope”.

Tales of drunken, drug-influenced last-minute flights to Barcelona mingle with a steely and grimly plausible narrative of what might drive a young woman in an unfulfilling zero-hours job to carry out a searing political act.

Through all of this simmer the confusions and contradictions of carrying on day-to-day lives in a constant background fug of worrying about the future.

There's some sense that the performance struggles to keep up with the events of recent days and weeks, and given the foregrounding of the fact that “what we know” is that we're in Manchester and it's 18 January—this insistence on the present, shared moment—it would have been interesting to see more immediately recent events incorporated somehow.

Yet perhaps this failure to keep up is part of it. After all, this is a heartfelt piece that, in form as well as narrative, dramatises the contradictions of caring in a globally connected world.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)