

British Theatre Guide

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

My Generation

Alice Nutter

West Yorkshire Playhouse

The Courtyard, West Yorkshire Playhouse

5–19 October 2013

My Generation is an ambitious and courageous production of an ambitious and courageous play.

Local playwright Alice Nutter has pulled out all the stops to present an account of one section of the left in Britain (indeed, in Leeds) over the last forty years. Four acts, four simple linear stories, one family and associates, a whole lot of idealism, angst, commitment and humour. Thank God we have humour. And brilliant music. And a superb cast, well directed (Max Webster) and word perfect.

More: there are moments of delightful business and exciting theatricality. Ben Stones's design is admirable, not quite a black box, into which is brought sink and sofa, rave marquee and middle class dining room. Set changes are fluid and unobtrusive. And the production announces its theatrical credentials straight off when two children step on stage and write the name of act I on an overhead projector.

Such heart-warming and sometimes heart-stopping moments are scattered throughout the show. They culminate for me in a heart-breaking act IV sequence in which a down-falling, class-translated character sees herself as a child (who had written on the projector) dancing in wellies at a school performance...

Act I, *Cath's Story*, is an everyday story of squatting life in the late Seventies. Peter Sutcliffe has more impact on street life than local or national government and radical feminism is kicking off its heels and finding its feet. Cath (Kaye Wragg) has two children by Mick (Craig Conway) and a table knocked together out of pallets. There is debate, family rows, break-up; the impact of ideas, ideals and crime on the street. It is all funny, informative and high energy, but never quite rings true.

In *Mick's Story* (act II), the curse of Thatcher is upon us and the household is all out for the miners. There is an adventurous attempt at portraying the ever-present police violence by a cheeky dance sequence, which is fine in its own right, but fails to do the job. And the act is seriously marred by a transparent plot device, which I won't outline in case anyone doesn't see it peeping through the through lines.

Come act III, *Ben's Story*, we hit rave culture and Ben (Craig Gazey), Cath and Mick's son, has had his radical structure seriously modified by chemicals and big speakers. This really is a rip-snorting act with another simple tale told beneath a huge orange tarp to a wonderful explosion of sound.

Harry Hamer (musical director and composer) has collected a handful of talent, at home on stage and across musical forms. Here is frenzy, interesting characterisation and perhaps the best of the stories. And a lot of ecstatic dance. By the end of act III, I found myself thinking that the thespians deserved Olympic golds.

So a relief for them that act IV (*Emma's Story*) is a dining room sit-down affair with plenty of talk bolstered by clash of opinion and conflict of interests. It's 2013 and Emma (Helen Bradbury) has gone over to the other side: big house, big money, big fall when her rich husband has to do time for a little drug dealing on the side.

As her life cracks apart, her upbringing shows through. In a moving sequence, she gives her wedding ring to someone worse off than herself. 'Why?' she is asked, and asks herself—and finds the answer: 'It's how I was brought up.' So idealism hasn't been fully extinguished. And the play ends with a song from Emma's daughter, Sky (Amelia Cook), which elicits that most precious theatrical experience: simultaneous laughter and tears.

Having lived through much of it in this city, I brought a more than usual critical eye. *My Generation* is by no means faultless, but it is fearless. And I loved it.

Nutter herself refers to *My Generation* as 'a sort of anarchist version of *Our Friends in the North*'. With its clearly delineated structure and unfolding disintegration of political activism, it is difficult not to see it in the light of Arnold Wesker's celebrated *Trilogy* and, yet more clearly, Trevor Griffiths's *Thatcher's Children*.

It's a harsh comparison. Wesker was a ground-breaker who exploded with autobiographical tension and exact detail. Griffiths had been skylarking at the top of his game for some time when *Thatcher's Children* premièred (and was then quickly kicked under the carpet by the theatrical establishment—times had changed!).

Alice Nutter is at the beginning of what could be a significant contribution to theatre, if she doesn't squander her talent on TV playlets and soaps. We become what we do. Griffiths is one of the few acclaimed playwrights who established reputation for quality on stage and television. *Thatcher's Children* had a consistent radical heartbeat and narrative voice.

Too often in *My Generation*, the voice wavers and there is the feel of a playwright thinking: what shall I bring in next? The stories are not brilliant and sometimes the writer seems to be working on thin ice with not much beneath it, straying too far from the press of personal involvement.

That apart, the potential is terrific and located exactly where it should be. The Playhouse is opening its mouth and showing teeth. Bring it on!

Reviewer: [Ray Brown](#)