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Neville's Island

Tim Firth

Stephen Joseph Theatre Company

Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough

6–27 August 2015

Tim Firth's dark comedy has been revived a number of times in the two decades since its early-90s première at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, including recently with [an all-star cast of comedians in the West End](#).

Now returned to its original setting as part of the SJT's 60th anniversary, Firth's piece is hilarious in places, overstretched in others and occasionally shows its age, having been superseded by more recent TV-based team-building and workplace comedies such as *The Office*, *The IT Crowd* and various episodes of *Peep Show*, for which this play seems to provide a prototype of sorts.

The premise is that of a dysfunctional group of middle-managers (all male) stranded on a small island somewhere around Derwentwater when the team leader, Neville (Daniel Crowder), misinterprets a set of clues and scuppers their canoe on the rocks.

This initial scenario is set up with wit and a series of strong character sketches as we meet the four colleagues thrown into the foggy wild by this sequence of mishaps. The setting, too, allows for a memorable, and damp, entrance for the performers, swimming ashore and setting up an impromptu base camp from their limited provisions.

This is, however, the most memorable aspect of the production's design. While Jason Taylor's lighting and the copious haze provide a suitably dim and foggy atmosphere, the design is lacking in a real sense of place. The decision to paint the stage with a brightly coloured abstract swirl seems jarring and, beyond a single indicative tree branch, the lack of naturalistic indicators of the wild world in which these urbanites are stranded is overall a missed opportunity.

The script itself has been updated in places, to include a reference to Mo Farah, for instance, but elsewhere we are needlessly rooted in the 1990s with jokes about mobile 'phones, the Exxon Valdez and one character's bachelor lifestyle showing their age somewhat.

Firth can do gags, though, and Henry Bell's direction handles these one-liners well. The play is packed with acerbic observations and digs, many in the mouth of sharp-tongued production manager Gordon (Craig Cheetham). Gordon's bitterness is directed, by turns, at Neville (Daniel Crowder), happily-married and hapless Angus (John Last) and, most destructively, the meek but vociferously religious Roy (Jamie Chapman).

Each of these actors presents a well-fleshed character portrait and they land the script's cunning setups and pay-offs with skill. But the plot at times seems to be treading water (no pun intended) with an odd sense of inactivity despite the numerous revelations and the characters' descent into danger, madness and desperation.

Perhaps one problem stems from Gordon's presentation as the most rational of the characters: despite this being 'Neville's Island', it feels as though Gordon is the audience avatar. But, as the play continues, his attitude towards the others is so unrelentingly bleak, bitter and hurtful that from comic misanthrope reacting to his adverse situation he becomes an almost satanic figure.

There are, then, some real laugh-out-loud moments and a set of intriguing characters and situations. Ultimately, though, it feels as though the play has been overshadowed in the years since its writing by some pithier, faster-moving and more nuanced dissections of workplace personalities and male insecurities.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)