

# British Theatre Guide

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

## The Hounding of David Oluwale

Kester Aspden, adapted for stage by Oladipo Agboluaje

Produced by Eclipse Theatre Initiative

The Courtyard Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds  
(2009)

To most Loiners the West Yorkshire Playhouse is still known as Leeds Playhouse. And when the Playhouse stages a new play which focuses on some aspect of the Leeds experience, a home audience can be expected. *The Hounding of David Oluwale* is no exception, except that the audience includes far more than is usual of Leeds' libertarian Left.

For David Oluwale's 'hounding' by members of the Leeds City Police is a local *cause celebre*. Briefly, Oluwale, a diminutive Nigerian with high if unrealistic ambitions arrived in Leeds in the nineteen forties. He was harassed by the police (Inspector Geoffrey Ellerker and Sergeant Kenneth Kitchen in particular), spent several years in our local mental hospital and drowned in the River Aire in 1969. It is almost certain that he was 'hounded' into, and possibly thrown into, the river by Ellerker and Kitching. They delighted in abusing and beating him over a long period. A Scotland Yard Inspector investigated the death and the Ellerker and Kitching were given short periods in jail.

The stage play is an ambitious attempt to relate this tragic story. And in many senses it succeeds. This is high quality trad theatre, complete with distorted set and some fine character doubling. Structurally there is fascinating and accomplished movement in time as the now dead Oluwale is revitalised to tell his story, with dramatised flashbacks, to Perkins of the Yard.

Daniel Francis plays Oluwale as an energetic figure of considerable panache. It is a brilliant performance. His changes between the living and dead Oluwale are superb. He creates a very believable and sympathetic character, though how closely this relates to the actual David Oluwale is questionable. Was he really so heroic? Few will know the answer.

Similarly questions are raised when we are shown scenes from Oluwale's childhood in Nigeria: how far are these scenes biographical? Regardless, they add little to the concerns of the play and simply feel like padding: 'good ideas for inclusion'. Unfortunately these scenes simply add to this production's prosaic and, no pun intended, plodding progress through a slice of local history which has national implications. Highly significant moments - moral or dramatic - are given the same treatment as cop-shop banter. The tick-tocking regular pace becomes wearisome in spite of good to very good acting, a strong, involving story, and at times exciting theatricality.

But the whole is quite believable, and this is a story which needs to be kept near the surface of our culture as turbulent times roll in and nationalist banners are unfurled.

*To 21st February.*

*Touring to Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Liverpool Playhouse, The New Wolsey Theatre Ipswich, Hackney Empire, Northcote Theatre Exeter, and Nottingham Playhouse.*

Howard Loxton [reviewed](#) this production at the Hackney Empire

**Reviewer:** [Ray Brown](#)