

British Theatre Guide

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Operation Crucible

Kieran Knowles

Folie à deux Productions and From Ground Up Theatre Company in association with Neil McPherson for the Finborough Theatre
Finborough Theatre
1–17 December 2013

“The name Sheffield is printed on every one of us” says Bob, the youngest of the four steelworkers in this celebration of the spirit of Sheffield and its people.

It centres on the night of 12 December 1940, when the city suffered seven hours of continuous bombing and Sheffield-born Bob, Tommy, Arthur and Phil, a Scot who married a Sheffield girl, were trapped in the basement beneath the rubble of the Marples Hotel.

Four actors play in a narrow space in front of a black backing that hides the set of the play being presented in the latter part of the week, but, with the help of Seth Rook Williams's lighting and Daniel Foxsmith's sound design, this minimalist production has a powerful impact. It is a fine example of how accomplished actors with a good script and an imaginative director don't need trimmings to make effective theatre, for very effective it is.

This is not a clear-cut, straight through narrative of the Sheffield blitz but a montage of the men's experience as they create the steel mill atmosphere, the energy, the heat, the molten metal by their physical performance, express their fears, their love for family. While one speaks of his unpreparedness to fight, another remembers his father walking into the gunfire across the Great War's no-man's-land.

The girl met at a dance, a new lad's initiation at the mill, the hungry thirties, the pleasure in the rare taste of an orange, the football teams, the rivalry and the pride—they are all there as well as the panic buried in the dark, the pain and grief.

Salvatore D'Aquila as youngster Bob, Joshua Mayes-Cooper as Arthur, still living with his dad, Paul Tinto as Scot Phil, new to fatherhood, and playwright Kieran Knowles himself as gentle Tommy, brightening the air-raid shelter with a bit of wallpaper from the attic, all bring their characters vividly to life. They work together, passing the text between them with a fluidity that makes the ideas flow in a way that is equalled by the control they exert in their physical co-operation as they create the mill.

You could close your eyes and hear this as a radio play, a play for voices, but Bryony Shanahan's production is full of movement and image and designer Sophia Semensky provides a neutral space in which they can create their own world.

Miniature in scale but operatic in effect, this exploits the intimacy of the Finborough to make this a very moving première.

Operation Crucible plays on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays only

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)