

British Theatre Guide

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

Our Friends in the North

Peter Flannery

Northern Stage

The Lowry, Salford, and touring

(2008)

Northern Stage has staged the first ever revival of Peter Flannery's 1982 play *Our Friends in the North*, written when he was resident writer for the RSC and which was later to become one of the greatest TV drama series of the 1990s.

The play follows the stories of four young friends from Newcastle through the 1960s and 1970s. Nicky is a left-wing political idealist who goes into local politics to change things for the better but discovers it runs by corruption and back-handers. Tosca and Mary marry and have a child and, thanks to Nicky, get a brand new council flat, but the building of the flats was given to builder John Edwards after some bribes to members of the housing committee and they soon start to fall apart. Geordie goes to London, works for a small-time gangster who runs porn shops and strip clubs, goes to prison after the police they had been bribing turn on them when they are being investigated for corruption and then fights against the black militants in Rhodesia as a mercenary.

Even at a running time of nearly three and three quarter hours, there is far less time to explore the lives of the four friends than was available in the TV series. What is lost or, to be more accurate, what was added for the TV series is the fifteen years from Margaret Thatcher's election as prime minister and a lot of information about the personal lives of the characters. While the political message is always told through the stories of the characters, the political always takes precedence over the personal. We therefore see very little about the four main characters as friends, and all the "will they or won't they" between Nicky and Mary is reduced to a single line when Nicky admits she was "the one that got away".

What the play gives us that the TV series cut out is a series of scenes set in Rhodesia (just before it officially became Zimbabwe) showing the benevolent racist attitudes of some of the white rulers who genuinely couldn't understand the objections against the restrictive form of democracy they were offering to the black majority. This is only tenuously linked to the rest of the play by the arrival of Geordie, and of course by the play's theme of corruption that runs strongly through every scene.

Whereas the TV series seemed to be centred around Nicky as a focal character, in the play he is pushed into second place by Geordie, with Tosca's and Mary's story reduced to little more than their fight with the housing committee. Craig Conway gives a stunning performance as Geordie, taking him from the amiable, inoffensive young man who goes along with anything with just a shrug to a bitter man with a grudge and a gun. Daniel Ainsleigh plays well the intense idealist Nicky alongside a superbly relaxed performance from Neil Philips as his rather tarnished (by the end) political hero Donohue. Paul McCleary is excellent as the policeman battling to root out corruption in the Met, and there are good performances from Neil Armstrong as Tosker and Sonia Beinroth as Mary and as Geordie's drug-addled erotic dancer girlfriend Rusty.

In fact there are no weak links in this 14-strong ensemble, between them playing 43 characters across 17 years without causing any confusion about who they are supposed to be in any scene. Soutra Gilmour's set is a battleship-grey lorry container box with various hinged and sliding doors and panels and steps up to the roof, which does an adequate job of locating the numerous scenes, although not everything was easily visible from the second balcony.

This is undoubtedly a flawed play that feels a little disjointed at times and leaves you feeling as if you have missed a lot of the lives of the play's main characters, and it is not as much of a landmark piece in the theatre as it undoubtedly was on TV. However it is still a fascinating piece of political theatre told through the lives of characters you can quickly identify with and care about. Erica Whyman's production for Northern Stage brings together a superb ensemble of actors to create a piece of theatre that is never dull, despite its length, and that clearly sketches out an important part of our political landscape from our very recent past.

Peter Lathan reviewed this production, with a slightly different cast, at its first performance in [Newcastle](#), and Sheila Connor reviewed this version at [Guildford](#).

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)