

British Theatre Guide

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

Popcorn

Ben Elton

Octagon Theatre, Bolton

(2004)

Popcorn, written almost simultaneously as a novel and a play, is Ben Elton's response to the controversy sparked off by Oliver Stone's Tarantino-scripted film *Natural Born Killers* over whether watching a violent film can make people commit violent acts. Elton sets his story in the Hollywood mansion of film director Bruce Delamitri just before and after he wins an Oscar for his film about a young couple who go on a killing spree. He has firmly rejected any responsibility for the actions of the Mall Murderers, a young couple who are killing people in a similar fashion to the characters in his movie. However the real-life murderers break into Delamitri's house on Oscar night and reveal that they are huge fans of his movies.

Delamitri is portrayed as a pretentious windbag, insisting on proclaiming his opinions about his movies and about the press linking them to the actions of the Mall Murderers even when those around him make it clear that they are not interested in listening to him. When the murderers appear and announce that they are big fans of his movies, this would appear to put Elton on the side of censorship; however it is not quite that simple. The bigger issue that Elton wishes to raise, which is introduced at the start during one of Delamitri's lengthy moans and creates the climax of the play, is about blame, and how people try to evade responsibility for their actions by blaming their upbringing or their education or anything else that will pass the blame away from them. The question is not whether Delamitri's movies caused Wayne and Scout to go on a killing spree, but whether they can blame them to get public sympathy and avoid prosecution.

The idea of bringing together the movie director and the murderers to debate these issues is a good one, and there are some moments when the play seems to be scratching the surface of a serious issue. However it never really gets far enough below the surface to provoke an audience into questioning its beliefs. The issues are often presented in lengthy speeches or discussions rather than in dramatic action, which frequently kill the pace of the play, especially towards the end. Of course this is a comedy from one of the most successful British comedy writers, and there are some very funny scenes and dialogue, some of which are quite disturbing at the same time.

The stunning set from director-designer Patrick Connellan comprises an all-white living room in Delamitri's Hollywood home with a white spiral staircase up to a balcony with an electric blind, which also has the appearance of a cinema screen. James Farncombe has done a wonderful job of lighting the production, and the effect when the blind opens, combined with a sound effect from sound designer Andy Smith, is breathtaking. The cast all perform their roles well, from the whining, well-dressed Sean O'Callaghan as Bruce Delamitri to the unpredictable redneck white trash played by Leigh Symonds as Wayne and Juliette Goodman as Scout. This is an excellent production of a play that is entertaining at times, but which appears to be aiming for more profundity than it actually achieves.

"Popcorn" runs until 24th April 2004

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)