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Pretending To Be Me

Compiled by Tom Courtenay from the writing of Philip Larkin

Comedy

(2003)

Sir Tom Courtenay came from Hull where Philip Larkin spent his adult life. The fellow feeling that this link engendered has led him to create this labour of love after an idea from Michael Godley. Like Simon Callow's Dickensian tribute, this is part biography and part performance of the man's works. Inevitably the two elements cross over regularly during the play's often humorous two hours.

Larkin was a misanthropist hermit who learned shyness and unhappiness from his parents. Under the direction of West Yorkshire Playhouse's Ian Brown, Sir Tom sounds rather like Alan Bennett and his jerky puppet-like movements are reminiscent of nothing so much as Parker from *Thunderbirds*. He wanders dyspeptically before the interval and increasingly drunkenly after, around Tim Hatley's box-filled set clearly representing the detritus of a life neatly boxed - like a biography.

The problem with Larkin as a man is that with the exception of jazz and looking at girls, he dislikes almost everything. Sir Tom wryly describes a lonely life and declaims twenty or so extracts of poetry. This is how the Hull librarian justifiably achieved his fame. When one hears *Dockery and Son*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and the unbearably poignant homage to a hedgehog that Larkin seemed to care about more than the parents whom he has elevated to literary immortality, it is easy to understand why.

Unfortunately, the man is not too attractive as he lords it over Ted Hughes and his mum and dad. However, the adaptation is gentle with Larkin's political views, the throw away "right wing" is rather mild after Andrew Motion's biographical revelations, and the homophobia is similarly skirted over.

The choice of one of life's loners as the subject for a play is perhaps a little odd. While the affectionate portrait tells much about Larkin's life and fans will be delighted by the excellent reading of the poetry of a man who chose not to become laureate, there is little action, either verbal or physical.

The good, well-directed central performance is all and Sir Tom, while not looking much like Larkin, is very impressive as he conveys the thoughts and words of this rather unattractive character. Somehow, though it is not quite riveting enough on stage for those who are not in love with the poet already.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)