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Smack That (a conversation)

Rhiannon Faith

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A sense of shame is one of the things that prevent victims of domestic violence from reporting incidents so allowing abuse to continue. As the title suggests *Smack That (a conversation)* sets out to tackle this situation by encouraging the wider discussion of the subject and so raising social consciousness around domestic abuse.

The manner in which Rhiannon Faith, who directed and choreographed the show, stimulates this discussion is highly original. The five members of the cast, all dressed identically in silver-grey wigs and grey dresses, greet the audience as they enter The Studio at The Lowry. Everyone in the theatre, cast and audience, answers to the name 'Beverly'—a uniformity emphasising that each of us has the potential to be a victim or an abuser. A party is underway with drinks, snacks and presents and the audience, seated around the stage, is encouraged to participate in the party games.

Smack That (a conversation) merges verbatim and participative / immersive theatre into a single production. Each of the cast is a survivor of abuse with the script based upon interviews with female survivors. Monologues outlining their experiences alternate with agonised interpretive dance routines. The latter are harrowing with the dancers objectified and thrown around the stage like a rag doll or performing brutal sexualised routines grabbing and thrusting groins in mechanical and joyless movements. The cries of the dancers are of pain or anger rather than passion. An offer of cake ends with the dessert being crammed into the dancer's face in a manner that suggests forced oral sex.

The monologues show the complexity of the problem tackling aspects that often leave observers baffled. People may find themselves subject to emotional manipulation and unable to leave a physically abusive relationship as their partner threatens suicide.

The audience participation part of the show tries to demonstrate how abuse can be commonplace and affect people even at an unconscious level. It discreetly encourages the challenging of such behaviour. As with most participative theatre, this is not completely successful. A game of "Never, ever have I..." where participants are invited to disclose if they have ever shared the experience of a cast member slips from bawdy humour and giggly tales of spilling red wine on white carpets to disquieting stories of feeling compelled to have sex or suffering unwanted physical attention.

Yet a game of "pass the parcel" where the layers of packaging conceal either sweets or factual statistics about abuse is rendered less effective as all of the detail is already available in the programme. An element of repetition creeps in with the cast reporting verbally much of the printed information at the conclusion of the show.

Maybe this is a reflection of our hypersensitive culture but for a show with such shocking content *Smack That (a conversation)* is remarkably cautious. The programme and opening feature trigger warnings and it is emphasised that the producers are aware men also suffer abuse and if the content (or even the volume) of the show proves to be too traumatic safe spaces and even counselling are available. It gives the odd impression that the company want to disturb the audience but not too much.

Despite an odd element of caution, *Smack That (a conversation)* remains a powerful piece of work that fulfils the objective of provoking discussion on a very disturbing subject.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)