

British Theatre Guide

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Stitching

Anthony Neilson
Company of Sirens
Chapter, Cardiff
4–7 July 2012

Abby and Stuart are a youngish couple who have just discovered that they are expecting a baby. This evening, they have to decide whether they are going to keep it, and whether the relationship will survive whatever decision they make. The situation is complicated by the fact that she is a student who moonlights as a prostitute, and he is a serial adulterer, addicted to extreme on-line porn. Or are they? We are in the world of Anthony Neilson, so things aren't quite that simple.

This is the Welsh premiere of *Stitching*, first staged in Edinburgh and London in 2002; director Chris Durnall and actors Nathan Sussex and Stacey Daly obviously fell in love with the author's uncompromising take on the interpersonal when working together on [The Censor](#) a couple of years ago.

This production is in the round, and Jo Hughes's set is minimal: two split-level tables in opposite corners of the space with a chandelier constructed from emotive photographs suspended from the ceiling. When we first meet the couple, they are pogoing together to Iggy Pop; this is pretty much the last carefree moment we witness. There is much dark humour, though, as the couple jab verbally at one another's tender spots, not to mention those of the audience—the Moors Murderers and concentration camp victims are invoked in an interplay of carnal shock tactics.

Over 75 minutes, Neilson takes us through the pivotal evening of decision via flashbacks, flashes forward, and surreal interludes (a child wandering onto the stage, then wandering off; an apparently drug-fuelled reminiscence), to the horrifying moment of self-mutilation which forms the play's climax. The language is uncompromising, and one is struck by the dislocatory effect of "sexual swearwords" employed in a sexual context, rather than as punctuation. Durnall's direction ensures that tension is maintained throughout; Caroline Lamb choreographs the (fully-clothed) sex scenes to sweatily potent effect; Jane Laljee's lighting design adds to the nightmarish ambience.

If there is a problem with the play, it is that scenes depicting reality, game-playing, memory and fantasy are so intertwined that I found myself expending more effort trying to figure out where within the narrative we were located than in empathising with the deeply troubled characters, who, despite their weakness, cruelty and self-destructiveness, were very engagingly drawn by Sussex and Daly. The piece is perhaps most effective if one reads it as a treatise on the destructive effects of grief and guilt on the psyche, rather than as some kind of universally relevant comment on the state of relationships in the Internet age; nevertheless, one imagines that it provoked numerous uncomfortable post-show conversations.

Compelling rather than enjoyable, *Stitching* is certainly a bracing experience. One is only sorry that the planned pre-show Q&A session with the playwright was cancelled—but perhaps some things are better left unexplained.

Reviewer: [Othniel Smith](#)