

# British Theatre Guide

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## Stuck in the Middle With You

Sam Robinson and Trevor Gill

Bright Umbrella

Grand Opera House Studio, Belfast

27–31 May 2025

First seen in 2024, Sam Robinson and Trevor Gill's *Stuck in the Middle With You* completes its current cross-border tour with a run at Belfast's Grand Opera House Studio.

Plays exploring the experiences of serving officers in the Royal Ulster Constabulary are few and far between. Caught, as the title suggests, between opposing paramilitary groups during Northern Ireland's Troubles, the armed police force was long tainted by its name, its attitudes and its actions.

Catholic representation in the force was never more than one-in-five during the Troubles, falling to just 8% in 1999, the year following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement that brought three decades and more of sectarian violence (almost) to an end.

When the RUC did find its way onto stage, it was seldom in a good light, the dyspeptic perspectives of Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull*, Martin Lynch's *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty*, Gary Mitchell's *The Force of Change* and the multi-authored *Forced Upon Us* caustically typical examples.

More recently, Laurence McKeown's *Green & Blue* and Philip Orr's *In Search of Hope* offered a more considered approach looking beyond and behind the "rifle green" uniform to the person wearing it.

Spanning the half-decade from 1996 to the transformation of the RUC into the Police Service of Northern Ireland (subject of hit TV series, *Blue Lights*), *Stuck in the Middle With You* echoes those more recent plays in offering a human face to those who found themselves caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Admirably, Robinson and Gill's portrait of five officers thrown together on duty in the "steel coffin" of an armoured Land Rover doesn't attempt to gloss over the personal and political conflicts that arise.

Based on anecdotal testimonies by RUC officers of the time, the blend of flashback and hindsight never flinches from the tensions and traumas, horrors and hopes that continue to haunt Northern Ireland's history and its fragile future. Nor does it shy away from the sectarianism and misogyny within the RUC, or from its collusion with paramilitaries.

The result is as harrowing as it is humane. Laced with gallows humour—and cleverly located at the flashpoint interface between Catholic and Protestant areas that Bright Umbrella's Sanctuary Theatre home in East Belfast straddles—if the script lacks the anarchic zest of Robinson's [Guy Mitchell's Dog's Dead – Pass it on](#), he and Gill (who also provides fluid direction) are concerned with rawer matters of the heart here. And deal with them with due consideration.

In a time-shifting narrative lacking a settling anchor, the committed cast of five muddy the water with occasional lapses of diction and (even in the intimate space) of volume. Although their doubling-up of multiple characters has a tendency to blur, there is compensation enough in their adroit measuring out of the hidden emotional and psychological inflicted toll on all of them.

Two stand-out scenes in the first half (a migraine prevented me from seeing the second) encapsulate the lingering scars of the Troubles. In the pointed, face-on first, Michael Levers's unreconstructed, long-in-the-tooth Protestant, Winston, locks antlers with Glenn McGivern's recently enlisted Catholic, Ciaran, to aptly encapsulate Northern Ireland's conflicted identity.

The post-Good Friday Agreement second features an unexpected encounter between demobbed combatants in a pub, ex-RUC man Norman (Thomas Galashan) and former IRA activist Michael (McGivern), in one of the evening's most charged and darkly poignant moments.

P J Davey's "Four Bellies", an old-fashioned cop trying (and failing) to make the best of a bad situation, is sympathetically played, with Galashan and Carla Bryson deftly inking in their varied characters.

Gill and Davey's compact set—a skeleton of a land rover confined by corrugated barricades—is lent added drama by Karl Smyth's well-judged lighting.

**Reviewer:** [Michael Quinn](#)