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Swansong

Sadie Spencer and Tom Black

DugOut Theatre

The Aldridge Studio, The Lowry, Salford

3–6 May 2017

Following a sudden and cataclysmic flood in the really-not-too-distant future, humanity has been reduced to a population of four, who now bob precariously above the rising tides that cover the earth's surface. The only thing saving them from a watery grave? The fortuitous appearance of a swan pedalo.

As the scenario suggests, DugOut's production is a light-hearted and at times deeply silly imagining of what to many is a distinctly serious threat to the planet.

This new Ark is simply represented by four chairs and four pedal exercisers, the quartet aboard it smeared with grime and in varying states of attire which reflect what they were doing when global catastrophe caught them on the hop. Reflected in their choice of garb, their personalities quickly become clear to the audience and it becomes evident that we're observing a slightly schematic arrangement of oddball antiheroes, custom-devised to rub each other up the wrong way.

So we have Claire (Nina Shenkman), an archetypal fitness fiend who's desperate to motivate the others by turning everything into a competitive sport; Stephen (Ed MacArthur), an incessantly vocal public school type who won't stop banging on about his impenetrably nicknamed "mates" who are "total lads", in an accent dripping and drawling with London money; Bobby (Charlotte Merriam), a vegan believer in crystal healing power and the importance of meditation and art; and Adam (Tom Black), the cynic who questions why on earth anyone wants to survive anyway, only to preserve the blighted legacy of the human race.

All of these are caricatures, clearly assembled only to provide dramatic tension and, eventually, to form an unlikely bond—but the script is frequently funny enough, and the performances all so likeable, that the show whips along joyfully despite the somewhat obvious dramaturgical joins.

The characters' grating characteristics are more than masked by the performers' warmth, some daft one-liners and a deft comic timing from all four. In DugOut's hands, it's very easy to take a shine to these "four idiots spectacularly disproving natural selection".

Sadie Spencer and writer-performer Tom Black's script does also evidence some deeper thinking alongside the lightness of touch, and this is the most I've ever enjoyed being reminded of my imminent total extinction. There are questions here about what we'd choose to preserve of "the old world", faced with an almost total blank canvas. It's both funny and fascinating to watch how the characters' knowledge that past misinterpretations of similar texts have led to sectarian and intellectual disputes causes them desperately to second-guess themselves.

This line of thought also provokes some more impressionistic interludes, which punctuate the action with a suggestion of the ritualistic songs and acts which might spring up based on the

disparate scraps of knowledge these four—the “forefathers”—decide to preserve. It’s a clever staging device which acts both as narration and as ironic distancing, while also showcasing the ensemble’s lovely vocal talents with some harmonised, chant-like song. These moments have the benefit, too, of opening the action up, away from the necessarily confined space of the four chairs.

There’s a section on the meaninglessness of language in the absence of all other context (involving—content warning—one of the most offensive words it’s possible to utter in English, smilingly defused of its taboo power), and a sequence questioning the purpose of art in the creation of a new world.

So like a more lightweight [Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons](#), or a less trenchantly political [Guerrilla](#) or [Morale is High \(Since We Gave Up Hope\)](#), *Swansong* considers our doomed future and the prospect of sketching a plan for the human race anew. It’s a short and slender piece, but it did deservedly well at the Edinburgh Fringe last year and is worth catching for its warmth, humour and positivity.

Reviewer: [Mark Love-Smith](#)