

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Taboo

Music and lyrics by Boy George, book by Mark Davies  
Theatre Royal, Newcastle, and touring  
(2004)

Take a couple of songs from a second-rate pop singer (and a third from one whose rating doesn't reach single figures); throw in every music theatre cliché you can think of; add a lame plot and even lamer dialogue, and behold! you've got *Taboo*.

I've heard it said that *Taboo* is a celebration of the New Romantics and the eighties in general. It isn't: it may have begun that way, but it has ended up as a vivid depiction of all the faults of that dreadful decade of obsessive selfishness. Even the team behind *Spitting Image* could not have written a satire on the eighties which would be more accurate and more damning than this show.

It's also been called "the Boy George musical" and whilst that is true in the sense that he wrote the music and lyrics, it certainly isn't "the Boy George story". That is only one strand of the plot which continually shifts its focus from Boy George to Leigh Bowery to Billy the would-be photographer to Kim his girlfriend and to Josie his mother (with sideways glances at Steve Strange, Marilyn and other "names" of the period). There is not even a tidying up at the end: the only strand where there is any conclusion is the Leigh Bowery one - and that's because he's dead. The show just stops and everyone comes on stage and sings a bit.

For example, Boy George's celebrated drugs involvement is dealt with in three scenes: in one we see him taking drugs, in another he is arrested and in a third he announces his determination to quit. Gripping stuff!

It is hardly surprising that the show died in New York: it's very much an impression of one tiny part of Britain during the eighties and if you didn't live through it, it's pretty meaningless, and the music certainly isn't strong enough to carry along an audience which must have been wondering what the hell this freak show was all about!

Having said all that, no one can fault the performances. This is a very talented cast who give 100% throughout, and they manage to make their outlandish characters believable, although even their talent can't make them sympathetic. Particularly impressive were Drew Jaymson as Philip Sallon, Stephen Ashfield as Boy George and James Gillan, who was a wonderfully convincing Marilyn. As for Julian Clary as Leigh Bowery... he was Julian Clary. He was funny and outrageous, but made no attempt to be anything other than himself.

Watching audience reaction at the end was interesting: some went wild, some applauded in a rather restrained fashion, and some looked bored out of their heads. I suppose there will be nostalgia for the eighties among those for whom that decade represents their youth, but for those who saw the economic misery it caused - and particularly here in the North East with the wholesale destruction of the shipbuilding and mining industries - it's difficult to get enthusiastic. It's not even as if the New Romantics' music was particularly good....

Steve Orme [reviewed](#) this production (with Mark Little as Leigh Bowery) in Nottingham.

**Reviewer:** [Peter Lathan](#)