

# British Theatre Guide

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

## That Face

Polly Stenham  
Royal Court Theatre Upstairs  
(2007)

*That Face* starts out as a kind of transgender remake of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* updated to the 21st Century.

At some swanky, girls' boarding school our female Flashman (Flash-girl?) Izzy is an appropriately cowardly sadist who eventually ends up gibbering after, with help of heroine Mia, she puts a 13 year-old Arthur substitute into intensive care following an initiation rite that goes wrong.

This element of the plot is forgotten early in the play, which actually turns out to be a shocking portrayal of Mia's mad family.

Polly Stenham, a 20 year-old playwriting debutante, writes with such assurance that one fears that a fair amount of the subject-matter is autobiographical. If that is the case, she, like her surrogate Mia, has endured a lot in her young life.

At times Mia, played by Felicity Jones, is so well grounded that she seems too good to be true. As Catherine Steadman's Izzy panics over her comatose victim, Mia is totally calm. Later, when family issues boil over, the 16/17 year-old is almost always the calm observer.

This is remarkable for someone who has a mother like Lindsay Duncan's Martha, whose relationship with her not entirely believable 18 year-old son, Matt Smith playing "hooray" Henry, borders on oedipal.

Following the departure of her husband to a new life and family in Hong Kong, Martha's life went into nosedive, aided by a combination of drink and prescription sedatives.

For five years from the time that he was 13, Henry supported, covered for and humoured this woman. He is so obsessed with keeping her that he gave up his own education and prospects to do so. He also very nearly gives Mum-Martha his body in a final effort to retain her sanity.

After Mia is threatened with expulsion from school, her father Hugh, a well-heeled businessman played by Julian Wadham, returns to sort out the mess.

In doing so, he is horrified by what he sees, especially Henry and Martha competing for who is drunkest and which wears the prettiest frock. He also has to face up to his own shortcomings and responsibilities, having deserted his children in every sense apart from the financial.

By the end, there can be little optimism for a family that has one member about to be sectioned, another who is apparently heading the same way and a third who will return to his comfortable life halfway across the world.

All hope rests with Mia, a girl who might well return to school, excel in her A-levels and go on to become a professional playwright, possibly even before she leaves university.

*That Face*, directed by Jeremy Herrin in the round, contains much wit. However, like *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, it can be unpleasant to watch at times, as its various characters self-destruct in conflagrations of mental and physical torture.

On occasion, Polly Stenham strives too hard for dramatic effect but few playwrights in their twenties are able to manage this many characters so ably or sustain the action in a play that lasts an hour and three-quarters.

She is a real find and is likely to be flooded with awards this year. It helps to have a cast led by the scarily impressive Lindsey Duncan and Julian Wadham, with young actors of the quality of Felicity Jones and Matt Smith in support.

*Playing until 19th May*

Philip [reviewed](#) this play on its transfer to the Duke of York's Theatre

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)