

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Big Corner

Adapted from the short stories of Bill Naughton by Lawrence Till

Octagon Theatre Bolton

Octagon Theatre

19 April–5 May 2018

For its last production before closing for refurbishment, the Octagon has turned to the writer whose work opened the theatre in 1967 and after whom the studio theatre was named, Bill Naughton. To add to the historical links with the theatre, the script has been put together from a collection of Naughton's short stories by former Octagon artistic director Lawrence Till and directed by current artistic director Elizabeth Newman.

While there is a lot of jumping around between stories, characters and time periods, the main uniting factor is the character of Bill (Dan Parr), whom we see at different ages telling stories to us, the audience, and to other characters within those stories. Growing up in Bolton with an Irish Catholic mother, working in a factory from the age of 15 and nursing a desire to write stories, the autobiographical basis for these stories isn't ever concealed.

However, if you have seen any amount of Naughton's stage work or film adaptations, a lot of this will be very familiar. For instance, the triangle between Bill, his wife Jenny and his best friend—who happens to be called Alfie like Naughton's most famous character—whom he even took with him on honeymoon, is straight out of *All In Good Time*, which was [directed by Newman in 2015 under the film's title of \*The Family Way\*](#), but without the dramatic context or development of the rest of the story.

Irish-born Naughton moved to Bolton when he was four years old and left before any of his work was published or performed, so it's not surprising that these stories set during his childhood in the 1920s and '30s have more than a tinge of nostalgia and sentimentality about them, liberally sprinkled with old-fashioned Lancashire dialect and sayings, slightly over-egging the 'authenticity'.

It all adds up to a bit of a hotchpotch of bits of stories which are occasionally amusing, some of which are interesting and some less so, some of which we have seen in more complete form in Naughton's plays, and others that really go nowhere. This patchwork approach may work for a while, but at 2½ hours it is far too long—the last half hour is very slow and dreary, but even by the interval it was starting to drag.

While the Octagon makes a lot of its connection to Naughton, who lived for much longer on the Isle of Man than he did in Bolton, it glosses over how the play that opened the theatre was received, even by its director. Octagon founding artistic director Robin Pemberton-Billing in his book about the opening of the theatre commissioned Naughton, hoping for a new *Alfie* or *Spring and Port Wine*.

However, "what I actually got was an old radio play entitled *Annie and Fanny*, rehashed for the stage, about a coach load of not so much Wigan characters as caricatures, on a coach trip to

Rome. To say I was disappointed is to put it extremely mildly. Even as a radio play it was poor stuff...". Naughton refused to change a word of the script, and so they "just had to make the best we could of a bad job."

I doubt that Pemberton-Billing would have been any more impressed with this compilation piece, the best of which had already been rehashed by Naughton for his own stage works.

None of this is the fault of a very good cast and a production that is reasonably well put together. Alongside Parr, an ensemble of actors create a large cast of characters across every age, many of which are very nicely realised: Jessica Baglow, Harry Long, Lauren Samuels and Mitesh Soni.

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)