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The Mourning After

Eleni Varon

Eleni Varon and Tom Hardman

The Empty Space, Salford

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I once attended a funeral for a friend named 'Brian' where the entire congregation 'corpsed'. The priest, who probably didn't get out much, invited us to pause and "think about the life of Brian".

Eleni Varon's *The Mourning After* has no pretensions other than to get the audience to laugh a great deal; an objective which is achieved in rare style. A funeral for the late Dylan James is interrupted when a pair of hecklers in the congregation takes exception to the polite impression which the Priest (Tom Hardman who takes on all male roles) gives of the deceased.

The story jumps back to explain why the hecklers behave in such a manner. Nessie (author Eleni Varon) has low self-esteem and is socially awkward (her idea of a playlist is to demand Alexa "play music"). She needs a housemate, and her comically bad advertisement is answered by Dylan. Rowan (Evangeline Henderson) has more self-confidence and does not mind being isolated (her pets seem to prefer death to her company). She has been friends with Dylan since childhood and, despite doing his homework, fails to grasp the relationship is exploitative. Dylan not only uses identical seduction techniques to get both women into bed, he dumps them both using the same worded text. When Nessie and Rowan realise they have been exploited, they decide payback is in order.

The irreverent tone of *The Mourning After* gives the impression of a loose collection of jokes. When not performing centre stage, Tom Hardman stands to the rear, picking his teeth and combing his hair. A tense confrontation is interrupted by the Priest inviting the congregation (that is, the audience) to rise and sing "The Lord is my Shepherd". Hardman closes the show in a crowd-pleasing manner which is hard to forget, and Lord knows I've tried.

But the anarchic approach conceals the tight construction of Eleni Varon's script. There is the classic comedy technique of three conversations taking place at the same time and the last word of one comically leading into the next speech.

Much of the humour stems from embarrassment, with smooth-talking Dylan taking advantage of the friends. Noting Rowan does Dylan's laundry, Nessie asks if her idea of flirting is to behave like his mother. Rowan is mortified by her parents continuing to have a happy relationship.

It is a carefully thought-out play. The graphic sex scenes described in the text are enacted by the cast in isolation striking physically outlandish poses, while jaded roué Dylan pretends to be conflicted about his behaviour. The multiple roles taken on by Hardman are performed with raised eyebrows inviting the audience to join in with the joke. Yet the cast never succumb to the selfishness of enjoying themselves more than the audience.

Varon and Evangeline Henderson create memorable comic characters. Henderson's Rowan is self-confident and assertive, striding around the stage and making eye contact with the audience, but self-deluded. Henderson has one of the key comic speeches—a ridiculously complex fantasy for getting revenge on Dylan. Varon's socially-clumsy Nessie is so desperate to be liked, she goes absurdly over the top, behaving like an eager puppy. Yet there is something likeable about Nessie, her enthusiasms endearing rather than irritating.

Eleni Varon makes a strong impression with her debut full-length play, making *The Mourning After* a cheeky comic treat for broadminded Fringe audiences.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)