

British Theatre Guide

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

The Ruck

Kevin Fegan

Creative Scene and the Lawrence Batley Theatre

Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield

15–16 September 2017

Following in the footsteps of David Storey's *The Changing Room* (1971) and John Godber's *Up 'n' Under* (1984), Kevin Fegan's latest play marks another addition to a small but distinctive theatrical subgenre: the rugby league play. However, whereas his predecessors chose to focus on the dreams and frustrations of working-class men, *The Ruck* dramatises the success of a real-life girls' rugby team.

Since forming in 2012, the Batley Bulldogs Under 16s Girls rugby team has won the English championship on two separate occasions. Furthermore, in 2015 they became the first British girls' team to tour Australia. Whilst not strictly biographical, Fegan draws upon the lives of the players and their families to create a play that explores the power of sport to forge relationships and bring meaning to people's lives.

The first half of *The Ruck* gives us an insight into the lives of four teenage girls growing up in Batley, a former mill town where many immigrant families relocated in order to find work. The arrival of a new Asian player, Iffy (Sophie Mercer), upsets the established order of the all-white, working-class team. In addition to this racial faultline, Fegan also throws boy problems, sexual confusion and family secrets into the mix.

In the second half, the team travel from Yorkshire to Australia, and here they test their mettle against players of Amazonian stature for whom rugby league is a way of life. The experience proves to be both physically bruising and mind-expanding.

Fegan has spoken about the potential pitfalls of trying to inhabit the psyche of teenage girls, but on the whole I think he does a good job here. The four central characters are vividly drawn and, for the most part, manage to sidestep the stumbling blocks of stereotype.

There is solid work from all eight cast members. Sophie Mercer brings strength and vulnerability to the role of Iffy, a Muslim girl who rejects the idea that women should be quiet and demure. As Heaton, a young woman dealing with complex family issues, Emily Spowage skilfully conveys the character's façade of toughness and the insecurity that lies underneath.

Esther-Grace Button is pleasingly warm and level-headed as Shelley, a young woman coming to terms with her sexuality. As a pink-obsessed shopaholic, Emley is the most cliché-ridden of all the characters, but Josie Cerise does a good job of humanising her whilst sending up her Elle Woods-like qualities.

Although Fegan is primarily interested in the four teenage rugby players, the adults are also sympathetically rendered. Richard Hand, in particular, gives a fine performance as the team's coach / Shelley's dad, striking just the right level of bemusement and fatherly concern.

Joyce Branagh directs with energy and a lightness of touch, and the rugby scenes, choreographed by Rachel Gee, bring dynamism and physicality to the production.

Olivia du Monceau's two-tiered set allows for some striking tableaux, particularly during the rugby scenes where the players are being spurned on by their coaches. Equally impressive are Chris Brearley's lighting designs, which powerfully evoke the characters' journey from rainy Batley to the sun-drenched Gold Coast of Australia.

The Ruck is a charming and sweet-natured show that casts some much-deserved light on the sporting achievements of young British women.

Reviewer: [James Ballands](#)