

British Theatre Guide

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Tough Time, Nice Time

David Woods and Jon Haynes

Ridiculusmus

Northern Stage, Newcastle, and touring
(2009)

Two German chaps sit in a tub in a spa in Bangkok, exchanging what could be construed as confidences or more plausibly seen as bizarrely misconnected revelations of what might be the truth or probably not. Most short, edgy evenings in the theatre don't tend to leave audience members asking themselves if they would share a bath with these men, but after the remarkable auto-character assassinations of Martin and Stephan, it seemed like a burning question.

Ridiculusmus has been around since 1992, with membership of anything from two to five, but *Tough Time, Nice Time* takes the company down to its core of co-founders (and here co-writers and performers) David Woods and Jon Haynes. Naked. In a bath. With bottles of beer, a note book and a few lighting effects. You certainly get what it says on the label, along with a witty, scurrilous dialogue in which two out-of-place non-locals each try to define and claim some territory by talking up their experiences, their attitudes and their capacity to engage with the seamiest sides of life.

The context is gay but any overt attraction becomes subject to constantly shifting negotiation as the pair work out what could be a business deal, an elaborate excuse or a duel where shock value is the weapon of choice. Most people tell stories, especially under such intimate conditions, to reveal an agenda, to show what needs to be shown. Here the narratives and revelations of character are deliberately slippery, designed only to offer what can instantly be withdrawn, or built upon to the point where it topples over into some variant of the absurd.

Martin at first seems the more nervy and perhaps vulnerable of the two. He's a lawyer who deals drugs (wrapped in tissues sweaty from close proximity to the more private parts of his body) and is unashamed that his past includes both being paid for and paying out for sexual favours. His commodity is his stories, tales of death and passion, relics of a sordid life that, despite its apparent intensity, stays resolutely on the wrong side of sexual glamour. He wants his stories properly written up, but can barely trust Stefan not to steal them. A deal must be made, but there's no firm ground on which to base it. Stephan, the writer, looks like a tougher cookie, trading an outrageous slice of attitude which revels in the imagery of genocidal horror, torture and violence. If what he says is true, then this is a man without conscience or compassion.

Only of course it isn't true. The two men have to go back a generation or two even to establish credentials that sound viable to each other (a grandfather in the SS, a desperately alcoholic mother). When they discuss their own lives, they seem unable to fix anything, sliding from the most intimate facts/fictions to motifs blatantly borrowed from Hollywood. But they are natural born talkers that's the spiky spine of the drama. They don't do, they say, and given free range, their conversation offers the guilty pleasure of a tour through forbidden realms, where nothing is too horrible to be funny, nothing too deceptive to be unfolded and rearranged into yet another pattern.

Stephan turns out to have a heterosexual marriage (I have balls they need emptying). For all his attitude, hes the one secretly trawling gay sites on the internet. Martins tales reveal more and more damage, but Stephan ignores their sordid potency and instead writes just the commonplaces of hackneyed pornography. They are both doomed to be tourists, even within their own lives but in the horror lies the humour. There are brilliant flourishes of decadent verbal fantasy sucking on severed-penis lollies, rolling frogs in talcum powder to predict lottery numbers that just have to evoke laughter. For such an unpleasant piece of characterisation, this scores remarkably high on comedy and collusion. If you can stomach being a voyeur to such a bleak revelations of human inadequacy and self-deception, the rewards lie in the articulate intelligence of the piece, if not the characters. It will, however, leave you feeling that you need a bath.

Robert Tanitch [reviewed](#) the premiere at the Barbican

Reviewer: [Gail-Nina Anderson](#)