

# British Theatre Guide

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## Tyne

Michael Chaplin

Live Theatre in partnership with the Port of Tyne

Live Theatre, Newcastle

27 June–20 July 2013

*Tyne* is Live Theatre's major contribution to the Festival of the North East 2013. Author Michael Chaplin is writer-in-residence at the Port of Tyne and in 2011 walked the tidal length of the river, reflecting on what he saw, the stories he heard and the people he met in his book *Tyne View*.

He has taken parts of the book, added a wide variety of music (Musical Director Kathryn Tickell) ranging from Tyneside traditional songs to pieces by Jimmy Nail and Sting, along with additional spoken material from local writers Sid Chaplin, Julia Darling, Tom Hadaway and Alan Plater, all of whom also had a relationship with Live, to create what is essentially a scrapbook about the river. In addition he has included a fair amount about the theatre itself which sits almost upon the Quayside and was originally a chandler's shop / warehouse.

This is both a strength and weakness, for scrapbooks are essentially "bitty", so to tie all these disparate sources together into a coherent whole he has created a story about recently bereaved brother and sister Mark and Kate and their late father Ralph and Ralph's own personal scrapbook which details his interest in—in fact, almost obsession with—the river.

To work as anything more than a formal device, this story has not only to be believable but must also involve the audience by holding our interest in its own right. To do this, Chaplin gives us a fairly complex backstory about this family and their relationships which is gradually revealed as the play progresses. It works, not least because of the performances of this family: Victoria Elliott as Kate, Paul Dodds as Mark and George Irving as Ralph.

Playing some thirty other parts (and a range of musical instruments) are Zoe Lambert, Jane Holman, Assad Zaman and Phil Corbitt, and all seven, at various times, join in the singing. It's a multi-talented cast—which, to be honest, we would expect of Live Theatre—and under Max Roberts's direction they move the play along at a good pace.

It is inevitable, in such a piece, that there will be some parts which feel shoe-horned in—how can you do a play about the Tyne without mentioning x or y?—but the cast carry them off with only a slight sense of discontinuity at the start. Julia Darling's short piece *The Women Who Painted Ships* is one such, but it is so beautifully written and Lambert and Holman perform it so well that that momentary jolt is quickly forgotten.

It would have been so easy to make the piece a kind of animated lecture or a series of sketches with nothing to bind the whole thing together but the theme, but Chaplin has taken the more difficult route, to find an approach which not only enables him to pass on all the important information but to do it in a way which involves the audience in a human story with real people in whom we can believe and to whom we can relate.

This has been one of the last events of the Festival of the North East 2013 and provides a fitting culmination for a month of celebrating the region.

**Reviewer:** [Peter Lathan](#)