

British Theatre Guide

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Under the Whaleback

Richard Bean

Royal Court Theatre Upstairs

(2003)

The whaleback is the sloping deck of a fishing trawler. The action in Hull-based playwright Richard Bean's new play is set in the cramped cabins of three different fishing vessels and gives a real feel for the lives of the men who make these their homes for weeks on end doing "the worst job in the world".

The first act takes place in 1965 when young Darrel (Ian McKee) joins his first vessel. The drunken Cassidy, named after Butch, a legend in his own lifetime, takes the young man under his wing.

Not only does Darrel learn of sea lore, he also finds out more than he had bargained for about his own parentage from Cassidy, a real character with a strong moral mindset. This was a true folk hero who rode horses through snug bars, did the strangest things with fireworks and was eventually immortalised in a statue.

We find out in Act 2 what became of Cassidy as the crew of a second boat, the James Joyce, suffer their third consecutive day off Ireland buffeted by a storm. These men are at each other's throats and, in particular, the wild Norm (Matthew Dunster) is going stir crazy. Eventually, he suffers a breakdown listening to tales of the sea and Cassidy from Darrel, now seven years older, and three fellows.

The final act moves the story on almost thirty years to 2002. The fishing fleet has gone from Hull forever. The unhappy Darrel is now reduced to showing tourists around a kind of sanitised "fishing experience" museum.

Enter Pat, a wide-boy who makes a living from illegal cigarette importation. He is irritating and unfulfilled. He also believes that his father is a man who went down with the James Joyce and blames Darrel for his father's death. Once again, home truths out and the young man, a carbon copy of his father (who is not the man that he thinks), has to come to terms with unpleasant reality.

Under the Whaleback is a black comedy that pays tribute to a lost community. It is extremely funny and at times shocking. The first half is a gritty, atmospheric drama about the hardships of sea-going folk that brings back memories of [The Good Hope](#) at the National Theatre a year or so ago.

After the interval, there is a sea-change to a harsh tale of the unfulfilled younger generation today. The two do not fit together perfectly but the linking theme of uncertain paternity and the way in which the discovery of a true father affects a son is moving.

The Royal Court has found another winner in Richard Bean and, with the help of director Richard Wilson, there is a real period feel. They are greatly assisted by their cast and, in particular, Alan Williams, fast becoming a fixture Upstairs at the Royal Court, gives great performances as both

Cassidy and the older Darrel. There is also a superb set designed by Julian McGowan that immediately establishes location and really comes into its own during the storm scene.

This review originally appeared on Theatreworld in a slightly different version.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)