

# British Theatre Guide

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

## What's Next?

Matt Roberts

Middle-Weight Theatre

The Old Joint Stock Theatre

17–18 May 2024

*What's Next?* is a one-woman play from Middle-Weight Theatre, an Exeter-based theatre company formed in 2013 by the writer Matt Roberts and director Tom Stabb. It tells the story of Harriet Quimby, the first woman in the USA to earn a pilot's licence and the first woman to fly across the English Channel, which she did in April 1912, the day after the sinking of the Titanic.

If you were asked to name a pioneering, female aviator, you would probably come up with Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson and then stop. Quimby was born twenty-two years before Earhart and twenty-eight years before Johnson, so in some ways Quimby's career enabled theirs. All three women were famous in their day, and all died in flight-related accidents in their thirties.

Born in 1875 in the American Midwest, Harriet Quimby was, at various times in her life, an actor, a screenwriter, a journalist and a theatre critic. In 1910, she was sent by the magazine *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* to cover New York's Belmont Air Meet, and she fell in love with flying. The following year, the magazine agreed to pay for her flying lessons, which she wrote up into a series of articles, and by 1912, she was ready to fly the Channel. Her triumph was overshadowed by the sinking of The Titanic, though, and three months later, she died in an air display in Boston. She was 37 years old.

Victoria Lucie is excellent as Harriet Quimby, and Tom Stabb's staging is simple but effective. Chrissy Marshall's and Lez Street's set consists of a chair on a small rostrum with a joystick in front of it and a screen at the back for some stills and video projection. In addition to directing, Tom Stabb also designed the projection, lighting and sound.

The play adopts two modes of address. Most of the time, Quimby talks directly to the audience, but the play opens and closes with a fictionalised dialogue between Quimby and an unnamed male ground control she calls Tonto, as in *The Lone Ranger*, on her Channel-crossing flight. There was no ground to air radio communication in 1912 and *The Lone Ranger* wasn't popularised until the 1930s, so this is creative licence on the part of the playwright.

In a little over an hour, the play covers the highlights of Quimby's life, but we learn little about her as a person. She never married, but there is a reference to John Moisant, who taught her to fly, and his sister, Matilde, to whom Quimby was close. Did she love either of them? We learn that, while she was earning fortunes in flying exhibitions, American suffragettes were campaigning for the vote, but the contrast is not explored. There is a hint at an emotional connection when we see Quimby torn between compassion for the people who died on the Titanic and disappointment at not being given the recognition she deserved, but it is brief.

The play, and production, work well as a vehicle for a very good actor to give a very good performance, and I learned something about an interesting woman I didn't know about before. But the one-woman, direct address format avoids the need to explore any of Quimby's personal relationships, and it can, at times, feel more informative than insightful.

**Reviewer:** [Andrew Cowie](#)