

British Theatre Guide

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Zero Degrees and Drifting

Clare Duffy, Liz Margree, Jon Spooner and Chris Thorpe

Unlimited Theatre

Traverse, Edinburgh, and touring

(2004)

Zero Degrees and Drifting is a charming, bizarre piece of sepia-toned theatre. This isn't the sort of piece of which one can take away either a wholly positive or negative impression; rather, there are moments of ethereal beauty mixed with confusion and questioning on the parts of both audience and characters.

It "is, at heart, a love story," writes director Jon Spooner in the programme (which itself is a delightful example of how well all elements in a theatrical presentation can be used to enhance the overall experience of the audience). The story is about Marianne (Sarah Belcher) and Alan (Nathan Rimell), whose long-standing relationship seems perennially on the edge of disaster despite their deep affection for one another. Their first scene on stage together is simply lovely, portraying two characters both in love and comfortable with one another. It's this scene which creates tension for the audience in later scenes, when it seems that the arrival of a mysterious stranger (played by Theron U. Schmidt) might end their happiness together.

Other characters in the play include the DJ (Chris Thorpe) and Bea Saunders (Elizabeth Besbrode), the curator of the local "Museum Of Everything That Matters" - which is falling into the sea as the cliff beneath it crumbles. Thorpe, whose performance consists entirely of the speeches he makes over the radio (and a few quiet words shared with a stuffed monkey) is a talented vocal actor, with comic timing that provides many of the plays lighter moments as well as an ability to communicate the deep tragedy of some of the situations he recounts. Besbrode's best moments are when she describes the items in the museum's collection, and when it comes time to interact with the stranger, her performance leans dangerously close to what one would expect from a children's TV presenter.

The story jumps between situations of each group, with the DJ broadcasting a search for missing persons and Bea giving a combination of a tour around the museum and a running list of everything the museum is in the process of losing. The two provide small vignettes that are a welcome distraction from the angst of Marianne and Alan's plight. Their relationship, while compelling in its first moments, becomes less interesting after the arrival of the stranger. Despite the company's intention (stated in Spooner's programme note) to tell a story about a woman whose desire to be compassionate and the risks she must take to do so, it's Alan's story which seems to carry the deeper risks. Confronted with the stranger's presence and his own reaction to it, it's difficult to classify Alan's actions as purely selfish - they stem not from a sense of cruelty, but a need for self-preservation.

Although Schmidt's entirely silent performance is a strong one, there's something about the presence of the stranger that just doesn't click into place. Obviously theatre calls for suspension of disbelief and a willingness to imagine things on the part of the audience, but it's difficult to keep in

mind that the stranger is meant to be found beaten and bloody in the surf when the only element of his appearance that's in disarray is slightly damp hair, and both Marianne and Alan's impressions of him are of light and beauty. Add to this the excruciatingly slow pace of his movements and the scenes in which he features, and one soon begins to think perhaps too much time has been devoted to his narrated arrival and interactions with the other characters. On deeper reflection, there must be some kind of thematic connection between the piece's aims of showing an act of compassion that both requires risk and is completely selfless on Marianne's part, and of the how the stranger's lack of a history and incomplete integration into the story colour our reaction to him - but if this is the case, it could use a bit of development.

While blending the chatter of the DJ into the scenes in both the museum and Marianne's lighthouse works well, one point at which the stories mix unsuccessfully is when the stranger pays a visit to Bea's museum. This encounter feels forced, as there's been no real sense of connection between the museum and the lighthouse before then (perhaps aside from the fact that both receive the DJ's broadcasts?).

Designed by David Farley and built by Todd Zonderman, the play's set is as nostalgically lovely as its plot. Action takes place in four separate locations: the DJ's booth, which appears about six or seven feet above the stage, and then the lighthouse, the beach, and the museum. All the elements of the sets and scenery are onstage at all times, and are manipulated by the characters to create different locations. The only jarring element of all this is the DJ's computer - a modern-day iMac which seems out of place beside the other pieces of technology - radios and recording devices which better fit the 1950s/60s aesthetic of the play. Guy Hoare's lighting provides crucial enhancement to the play's emotional cliffhangers, and also plays up the colour scheme of the entire play.

The strength of *Zero Degrees and Drifting* is Unlimited Theatre's ability to capture moments which mean something with exquisite precision. The tale of a painting which sets itself straight on the wall, clocks which stop when lovers are about to be re-united, collections of raindrops from all the various weather conditions, and cultural memories of empire all carry a quality of wistful hope, but forcing these moments into a fairly linear plot take away some of their magic.

In spite of this, *Zero Degrees and Drifting* is a singularly beautiful piece of storytelling, obviously crafted with love and care. Unlimited Theatre does succeed in transmitting this to its audience; the piece may drag a bit in the middle but one comes out of it unable to forget the magical feeling engendered by the vignettes.

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Reviewer: [Rachel Lynn Brody](#)