

One foot in the grave

The crew of experimental production *A Matter of Life and Death* talk to [Ella Barker](#) about York's independent and underground theatre

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Sam Hill is a man exempt from *The Mousetrap's* enduring popularity. “[It’s] been going for like 70 years... Why?!” he asks sardonically. Entering its 64th year, Agatha Christie’s murder mystery play is in fact making the rounds with its diamond anniversary tour, visiting York later this year. Yet Hill makes a valid point. “We need new stuff”, he argues emphatically.

Golfo Migos and Joseph Willis seem to agree; the latter lambasts regional theatre for forever relying on what sells. “Like you’ve always got to do a panto to make your money. But then once you’ve made that money, you’ve got to be able to take risks.” Whether it is their subject matter or the experience of putting on a play itself, a willingness to gamble is a trait you cannot deny of Hill and his enigmatic crew.

We meet on a dreary Thursday afternoon to discuss *A Matter of Life and Death*. Written by Fred Rosen, Hill is directing the play, with Migos producing and Willis heading up marketing. Crowded round a table-for-two at the back of a fashionable coffee shop on Fossgate, our surroundings seem appropriate for the kind of upcoming independent theatre they’re keen to promote – not to mention Hill’s canny choice of location in Orillo Studios. A kooky venue situated off Heslington Road, it is the home of Orillo Productions, an enviable York born company that specialises in making eclectic and engaging films. Hill’s own contacts there and Orillo’s glowing reviews by fellow theatre company The Antigone Collective espoused it as their location of choice. “It’s a great venue – we need to import the seating but other than that...” Hill trails off.

Venturing beyond the confines of campus seems key to this production. Looking to bridge the gap between York's permanent and part-time residents, Willis broaches a lack of "coalescence": "students... stay in the student area, locals stay in the local area...And it's kind of helpful [having] these really small brilliant little spaces like Orillo and *The Fleeting Arms*, you get both the mixture of the audiences and they get to both interact." Hill quips in, "York's got a massive theatre community, which could come very close to the student community if people work for it."

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A yearning to escape the hackneyed mainstream appeal is partly down to the burgeoning number of students, thinks Willis. Many have stuck around in the area to try their hands at multiple theatrical endeavours. From the domineering 'big venues' of three years ago when Willis and co. arrived to the myriad options of today. Not Cricket Productions recently put on a promenade performance of *A Christmas Carol*, while ex-student Alex Wright of The Flanagan Collective headed up an immersive production of *The Great Gatsby* at The Fleeting Arms throughout December, whereby the audience was free to roam and watch what they wanted. It all comes back to Willis' remarks on the lack of theatrical risks nowadays. With *Gatsby* "that's something that I don't think York Royal or the Barbican would do", he says.

But that's not something that Hill's crew are afraid of. This intrepid company is characterised by its tenacity and self-sufficiency. Hill insists that "we literally started on nothing, as in we had nothing" – not even a script. *A Matter of Life and Death* were successful in securing sponsorship from DramaSoc, but even that is part of the "campaign and process" notes Migos: a process that involved locating a venue and its seating, and raising the money for all of their production costs. "We could have not got that and had to do another load of fundraising." It's humbling to see Hill slightly surprised and genuinely proud of what his company has achieved, even before the play opens: "We've gone from nothing to having a show and I couldn't have done that without any of these guys."



Image: Liam Mullally

Indeed, this process of "nothing to everything" is what makes them distinct and why Hill urges people to come and see their show. Discussing the success of British theatre company Punchdrunk and their "core vision" in pioneering the use of immersive theatre, Migos is encouraged that they were "at our stage at one point".

If the company's hard graft is anything to go by, the play will be a resounding success. Still, all are quick to acknowledge the northern community spirit so visibly palpable during the flooding over the festive period. Free from both the University's 'official boundaries' but also their 'safety net', Willis voices a concern that "everyone's going to shut their door on you. The nice thing about York", he says, is that "there are so many different places willing to help and promote", citing how efficient Fulprint (a local printing company) were in producing the play's posters. Hill seems similarly indebted to the generosity of Heslington Church in lending the show 17 pews for the audience to sit on, and somewhat relieved that they've raised enough money to hire a van to transport them all.

On the subject of church pews, Hill jokingly assures me that the fact they were free wasn't his only motivation for hiring them. As its title suggests, the play confronts our impending mortality, taking place as a conversation between two friends. Paul is Death and has the job of telling Simon that he's going to die and helping him to prepare for it. Hill is keen to liberate the subject of death from what he sees as society's "tropic and categorised" approach by reorientating this difficult issue as both strangely familiar but also oddly mundane. This is where his unconventional choice of seating comes in. Orillo Studios is a converted chapel, he tells me, and by mimicking the backdrop for a funeral through the use of pews, Hill can "marry the two major themes and settings of the play" together.

Adjusting how their audience think about death goes hand-in-hand with altering who comes to see their production. Migos is astute on how far our coping mechanisms towards terminal illness have come in recent years: "Nowadays, it's more 'let's see how we can cope with this' and see different ways, and making it out in the open. I'm a firm believer that this play will help that kind of thing." In this sense, as Hill tells me, friendship is vital to the dynamics of their performance. Paul and Simon are "also just two friends who like to drink beer and chat about girls and stuff like that. It's nice, it's a lovely play."

Bridging both these gaps in perception and attendance reiterate why "these really small brilliant little spaces" are so important to the city's underground arts scene. "It seems to be that venues are popping up all over," says Migos - enthused by a new black box styled space opening above the Crescent in town, and exactly why she perceives York to be ever more desirable and "feasible" than London. If this is a sure sign of things to come, then the city is in for a theatrical smorgasbord throughout 2016. M

A Matter of Life and Death is on at the Orillo Studios between 18 and 19 February. Tickets can be purchased through www.yusu.org.



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