Review: The Pillowman

Rosie Brear reviews The Pillowman, one of the most disturbing pieces of theatre on campus

By Roseanna Brear
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Venue: The Black Box Theatre, TFTV
Director: Hannah Wills
Producer: Rosie Field
Rating: ★★★★★

It is always refreshing to see student theatre that isn’t performed in the Barn. Though much loved, the space is limited and would not have been able to adapt to suit the highly complicated technical nature of this particular performance of The Pillowman. Before I had even glimpsed the stage itself, walking into the black box theatre of the TFTV department to a mood-setting soundtrack, I felt a surge of belief that this was going to be an impressive and professional production. I did not leave disappointed.

Hannah Wills and Rosie Field pull off what is, in my mind, an exceptional piece of student theatre. Martin McDonagh certainly lays the foundations with a flawless and iconic script, but in the hands of the less capable it wouldn’t be the thought-provoking and engaging show that it turns out to be. With solid performances from the cast and an outstanding use of lighting and multimedia, The Pillowman is a show not to be missed this weekend.

Set in an implicitly totalitarian state, the story centres around Katurian (Olly Brassell), a writer of dark and deeply disturbing stories usually culminating in the torture and murder of small children. He has been brought in for questioning by one detective Tupolski (Katie Harrison) and her policeman associate Ariel (Stewart Crank) with regard to the disappearance and death of three children. The play opens with Katurian, head bagged, sitting on a chair facing his interrogators while his brother Michal (Stevie Jeram) sleeps on the bed in the “next room” across-stage. All the while the illustrious Pillowman sits silently on the back row of the audience, awaiting his turn in the story to come.

The set is apt. Stripped back to essentially a table, two chairs and a bed, the minimal design allows for both the interrogation room scenes and the prisoner cell scenes to, respectively, own their part of the stage without leaving any palpable dead space. The lighting too is very well designed and expertly carried out. Although there are times when the technicalities do come across as a little over-ambitious – the overhead projector slides move a little too quick to catch more than a glimpse of each photo while the soundscape accompaniment of one of the story-tellings lags a little behind the story itself – these hiccups do not detract from the performance and, on the whole, the multimedia is far more impressive than it is lacking.

Brassell, as Katurian, delivers a brilliant performance of a very challenging role. He opens the show with marked confusion as to where he is or why he’s there; confusion which is mirrored by the audience. As the play unravels, the questionable nature of his storytelling and the disturbing content of his stories baffle us further. Is he a good guy or isn’t he? Engaging and earnest, Brassell commands the audience’s sympathy.
with his desire for free speech, despite the nightmarish content of his stories. Throughout the play, the moral ambiguity of his character peaks and troughs, juxtaposing the horrific consequences of his story writing with the harsh reality of his unsavoury upbringing.

The supporting cast also deliver commendable performances. While Harrison’s Tupolski was perhaps the weakest link, somewhat lacking in presence and conviction of character, Stevie Jeram gives a wonderfully moving and sincere performance in his role as Katurian’s mentally handicapped and emotionally scarred brother. Jeram approaches the part sensitively, creating a naïve and believable character while avoiding any clichés. The entire show is directed with flair, displaying intelligent staging and outstanding use of multimedia. Special mention must go to the cast and crew of the short film accompanying the ‘Little Jesus’ story, which was well shot and skilfully edited.

En bref, The Pillowman delivers what I have no doubt it sets out to do. Harrowing and thought provoking in equal measures, the script is expertly dealt with by both cast and crew alike. With only one performance to go, I thoroughly recommend trying to get your paws on one of the remaining tickets, if indeed there are any left.