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Theatre Review: The Habit of Art

Oscar Bentley heads to the York Theatre Royal to check out Alan Bennett's play

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Image: Helen Maybanks

The Habit of Art is a curious play. It's a play-within-a-play, offering us a look at an ageing W H Auden and Benjamin Britten, the famous poet and composer respectively, and how they've adapted to moving from the height of popularity to approaching irrelevance and exclusion. But it's also a discussion on the nature of acting, depicting the troubles and turbulence of their craft. The theme that marries both halves is clear though - that for artists, art is an imperative.

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The Original Theatre Company's first revival of Alan Bennett's 2009 play, first produced by the National Theatre and starring the late great Richard Griffiths, begins its journey at York Theatre Royal before touring the rest of the country for the remainder of the year. It stars Matthew Kelly as the actor Fitz, portraying Auden, and David Yelland as the actor Henry, portraying Britten. The actors in the company are rehearsing a play called *Caliban's Day* - so named because of Auden's view that Caliban should have had an epilogue in *The Tempest* - but are missing the director and two of the actors. They work through the play, showing us an insight into the lives of Auden and Britten - but also into the actors themselves.

Kelly, as the lead Fitz/Auden, unfortunately seems to lack a little nuance. That's not to say he isn't good, and he's great as Auden, effectively portraying his need for everything to be on time and inability to not run his mouth. However, he struggles to differentiate between Auden and Fitz. Fitz often goes off on one about the sprawling dialogue and his inability to remember it, but the trouble is, Auden also spends a lot of time going off on one, with Kelly not really drawing a line between the two characters.



Image: Helen Maybanks

The contrast between Auden and Yelland's Britten however is fantastic – both a pair of old queers reminiscing about a time when homosexuality was illegal, both a pair of artists who can't help but stop creating, even if their best creative juices may have long been squeezed (as Auden proclaims more than once, he just can't help himself. He has 'the Habit of Art'). Auden is the crusty old man who pisses in the sink and hires rent boys who don't want to be defined as rent boys, while Britten is the quieter, reserved composer working on his final hurrah. They both have vulnerability; Auden's hatred of some of his own work and hearing it quoted back to him, and Britten's reluctance to accept that he isn't just gay, but also has an affinity for young boys.

And while *The Habit of Art* is all very meta, it's *Caliban's Day* which proves the most intriguing watch. The play within a play concept is interesting, and Adrian Linford's set feels almost incomplete, therefore making it perfect, capturing the rehearsal room flawlessly. Robert Mountford's playwright Neil is brilliant, and it's thoroughly amusing to watch his reactions as the company begin bastardising his text. John Wark's Donald (portraying Auden and Britten's biographer Humphrey Carter) also provides the most interesting musing onto the troubles of the actor, being determined to make sure Carter is not just a device, but a character in his own right (when of course he is just a device). Veronica Roberts' stage manager Kay is brilliant, dealing with the whims of both the actors and the playwright, steering the ship as the director is away and holding everything together.



Image: Helen Maybanks

And while the rehearsal aspect is intriguing, I can't get away from the fact that I almost wish I was just watching a production of *Caliban's Day*. It even closes with a much more satisfying ending – Stuart the rent boy (the actor Tim, played by Benjamin Chandler) gives a big f you to Auden and his pessimism, complaining that people like him are just the footnotes in the histories of people like Auden, finally thematically giving Caliban his day, so to speak. Compare that to the casual end of rehearsal and leaving of the company in *The Habit of Art*, which, while it may be true to life and thematically satisfying in that way, just seems to pale in comparison. Then again, *The Habit of Art* contains the ending of *Caliban's Day* (*The Habit of Art is Caliban's Day*), so surely that means it does indeed have a strong end? My head hurts.

The Habit of Art is also hilarious. The first act in particular is a laugh a minute, causing some raucous explosions from the audience. The post play discussion also proved fascinating, with the best note of the night coming from Roberts on the difference between British and Irish theatregoers. British theatregoers ask ‘what do you think?’ whereas the Irish ask ‘how did it make you feel?’ which is bloody brilliant, and links into the very crux of Bennett’s work here. Art isn’t there for you to say what you thought of it – this entire review I’ve written is, ultimately, irrelevant – it’s there to make you feel something. Discard my thoughts then dear reader. If it makes you feel different to how you went in – shocked, elated, or moved – it’s well worth the visit.

6/10

The Habit of Art runs at York Theatre Royal until 8 September, before going on tour to Brighton, Oxford, Salsbury, Guilford, Richmond, Liverpool, Cambridge, Coventry, Salford, and Malvern until 1 December. To purchase tickets, visit <http://www.originaltheatre.com/tickets-the-habit-of-art-2018/>



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