

## BOY

Spectacle Theatre on tour



*“...swirling, marvellously-written dialogue, and while some of it has an adult sensibility (and sense of humour) it never loses or patronises its young audience.”*

Dic Edwards’s latest, and maybe even last, play for young people is all about poetry. Which is what you might expect from a playwright who has just published his latest book of verse and whose interests have manifestly lain in the role of the artist as honest explorer of the subconscious.

But at the same time *Boy*, written for Spectacle Theatre, is a typical Edwards play: a wayward 12 year-old, the son of an eccentric but lyrical mother and grandson of an even more eccentric grandfather, channels his individuality away from naughtiness and into emulating the verse of the American poet Walt Whitman .

Now Whitman, not the most familiar of poets to young people today, especially this side of the pond, just happens to bear an uncanny likeness to the grandfather – or should that be the other way round, with the old man sitting in his rocking chair, striking his flowing white beard and quoting Whitman.

The motive for becoming a poet is so the family can raise enough money to pay for them all to go to see Whitman’s burial place just outside New York, his grandfather’s wish before he goes to that great Parnassus in the sky.

It’s an unlikely narrative for a play written for those on the cusp of primary and secondary schooling, but certainly at the school I attended the audience had no problem with the swirling, marvellously-written mix of non-naturalistic dialogue and schoolboy concerns about willies and weeing. At least the kids didn’t, although the staff, who perhaps ignored the poetry for a soapish interpretation, had to be provided with tissues after an outburst of crying at the end.

In fact in the after-show discussion between cast and audience, the young people revealed far more sophistication than their teachers, something that delighted Dic Edwards, sitting at the back of the hall.

Edwards is one of Wales's best playwrights but his refusal to compromise or to be pigeonholed or be populist means his work tends to be seen abroad more than in his own country – apart from his work for Spectacle, with this his 13<sup>th</sup> show for the company in about as many years.

Director Steve Davis shares Edwards's conviction that the writing should be allowed to work on its own but here he has added a little twist by having the three characters express their restless lyricism through some intertwined movement, making it all that much more removed from a straightforward piece of storytelling.

There are here issues that can be explored in the classroom – apart from poetry, language itself, bereavement, emotional expression, and so on – but it is never an issue-led piece of conventional Theatre-in-Education.

Spectacle's familiar female duo of Carys Parry and Enid Gruffud are here supplemented by new company member John Norton, a remarkably talented performer who, incidentally, I last saw in a very different Edwards play, *Utah Blue*. Like that fascinating study of murderer Gary Gilmore, *Boy* continues the writer's obsession with America (he has published a trilogy called *Americana*), with the Whitman coda reinforced by guitar and banjo plucking and bluegrass clothes.

I would not skate over its faults – mainly to do with structure – but the production is still feeling its way and will improve once the occasional sags are sorted out, there's a little judicious editing and Norton loosens up and contributes as he is able to what is already a very physical show. But it is a very brave production, and while some of it has an adult sensibility (and sense of humour) it never loses or patronises its young audience.

**David Adams, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2008**