

A multi-layered, provocative slice of social realism

Bad Mammy

Spectacle Theatre, developed with *the theatre in education company*, Leeds

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Bad Mammy, Paul Swift's play for over-10 year-olds, directed here by Steve Davis for Spectacle Theatre, is a fine piece of writing, one that as a play is in itself dramatic and as a stimulus to discussion is full of potential. And, like so many other YPT pieces, it will be read differently by the target audience and by adults.

The narrative, for example, develops gradually but, maybe for adults., not unexpectedly, rather in the manner of accumulative disclosures from the two children at the heart of the story. The dramatic device is to have the kids, a six-year old girl (Amy) and an 11-year old boy (Liam), explain to their father (or rather , her father, his step-father: an important point) why their mother (his ex-partner) became so ill that she has had to be rushed to hospital.

We understand pretty soon, despite the six-year old's simplistic version, told with dolls, that the mother has been drinking heavily and has collapsed. The girl's explanation is that the new neighbours, Cameroon asylum seekers, have swapped her nice mammy with a "bad mammy" she doesn't recognise.

What we, the audience, might think have to do, then , is discover the real causes of the mother's abnormal resort to alcohol and so the absent mother becomes the central, never seen, figure in the drama.

We find that the mother's father had recently suffered a heart attack and it was following this that she could not sleep and took to bottles of Bacardi as a soporific. Delving further back, we realise that she had as a child been abused by her father and his sudden imminent death presumably triggered her nightmares and mental distress.

But this is get ahead of ourselves, because this root cause of the play's action is not revealed until quite late. (In fact, so late I wonder if younger audiences even take in this denouement.) What we get are a series of revelations, implicit and explicit, about the boy and his step-father and, it seems to me, the play becomes more about them, and questions of masculinity, than, for instance, about the effects of child abuse.

We hear that the step-father (Rob), a soldier who has been fighting in Iraq, drank, enjoyed porn and beat both the mother and the boy, which is why they left him; his attitude throughout is of a man who thinks that boys have to be tough – despite himself being (in Norman Murray's portrayal) a soft-spoken, apparently nice, guy.

Liam, we might think, is the most sympathetic character (and the one nearest in age to the target audience): he is bullied but he's bright, he cares for his mother and his sister, he makes friends

with the Cameroon boy next door. But most of these are regarded by Rob as weaknesses – and, perhaps (certainly on the day I saw it), also by the audience.

Characterisation is key to this production. And here it is obviously to do with perception and where you're coming from. For adults, I guess, we'd put Amy down as a slightly precocious child who doesn't really understand much and still loves her dad; Liam as a bright, kind and in many ways brave boy who acts as the family anchor; Rob as a typically brutalised, not very intelligent, racist, sexist, macho man; and the absent mother, Helen, as a woman whose childhood horrors have come back to haunt her, whose life with Rob was pretty bad and who has fallen victim to alcohol abuse.

Paul Swift's script, and Steve Davis's direction, doesn't necessarily push us in that direction but we might see Rob, for example, as more of a caricature; Liam as a more complex person still struggling with his identity but essentially generous and mature.

And yet when I saw it, and I don't think this would have been uncommon, Rob was regarded with a lot of sympathy; Liam as a wuss or "gay" (in the modern rather than sexual sense); Amy as maybe not as misunderstanding as we might think; and the mother as irresponsible.

As an adult audience, of course, the play would be interesting but not that remarkable: there would be little debate involved.

For young audience this is, though, merely the starting-point. We're seeing it by interpreting Amy's and Liam's narratives and memories, associating more with the mother and father; for the young audience they are where Liam is – he is their peer and they may be afraid that they too, like him, might be regarded as "gay" or over-sympathetic to outsiders like the asylum-seekers. Small surprise he can be seen as the least liked of the characters.

This is "active theatre": and actually as an adult audience we have no right to be here, since it is designed entirely to promote involvement and discussion. For young audiences the play, it is hoped, will raise complex, even remote, issues around mental health, stereotyping, self-image, bullying, young carers, domestic abuse, sexual abuse.

As an outsider, an observer, I thought it well structured, if a little prescriptive in its introduction of "issues". But I suspect that the young audience's sympathies may be determined as much by the characters: I assume both Norman and Gwion Huw were trying to play against the obvious characterisation (Norman's Rob maybe was so likeable that the awfulness of his behaviour might be ignored or even rejected as untrue; Gwion's Liam was so aggressive towards his stepfather that his strength of character could be sidelined) but this could be confusing and, as an adult, I'm afraid I just didn't believe in Rob and found Liam old beyond his years. Carys Parry played Amy with enthusiasm but made her more forceful than any six-year old I know, and therefore also less credible, a stereotypical little sister.

I found the set, such as it was, so perfunctory as to be off-putting – but I guess again that its ordinariness was the whole point: a shapeless settee against a tatty wall. In a cramped performance space, that living room looked even more uncomfortable.

And I am not convinced the basic framing device, of having the audience pretend to be social workers, was effective, although it may be necessary for any later hot-seating etc. Was there enough preparation for them to assume that role? Did it really affect their perception or their perspective as they heard the stories?

Again, I comment as someone for whom this piece of theatre was not made. I look forward, however, to seeing just what the many 10+yrs kids who are privileged to have Spectacle visit their schools made of this multi-layered, provocative slice of social realism.

Reviewed by: David Adams