

PORNOGRAPHY

by SIMON
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IATL Performance Festival Bursary Project Report
for Warwick University Drama Society's
production of 'Pornography' at the National
Student Drama Festival 2013

The Festival

Warwick University Drama Society's production of Simon Stephen's 'Pornography' was originally performed in the Warwick Arts Centre studio from November 14th-17th 2012, where it was viewed by a representative of the National Student Drama Festival (NSDF). To the delight of the creative team, it was announced in February of this year that the production had been selected as one of 11 out of over 100 productions to be transferred to the festival in Scarborough in March 2013. NSDF is an annual festival which celebrates and showcases the highest calibre of student theatre from societies and groups across the country. In addition, the festival provides attendees with workshops to develop their creative and practical skills, networking opportunities with industry professionals, and a platform from which to launch their own professional careers in the theatre industry.

New Opportunities

Transferring a production such as 'Pornography' to an entirely new theatre and environment was a challenge which offered both the cast and creative team the chance to develop pivotal skills for a career in the industry. Whilst the opportunity to perform in the Warwick Arts Centre is fantastic, and certainly a huge contributing factor to our ability to stage this technically demanding work in the first place, the ease of the existing relationship between WUDS and the arts centre ensures a smooth, and at times formulaic, process in producing a student show; the venue's set up, the audience and the marketing methods used in on campus student productions are tried and tested and as such don't vary greatly between productions. However, recreating 'Pornography' in a purpose built in-the-round theatre called for a redesign of the set; we were no longer able to immerse the audience in cable by hanging it from back walls, as the seating would now be raked, with a capacity of almost four times that which we had originally played to. These differences allowed our technical team and set designer to explore and develop new relationships with the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough. In addition, revisiting the production allowed us the time to tighten up and improve many technical elements, such as the projections which were almost completely redesigned.

The cast and director also benefitted greatly from the festival experience, taking on board the detailed and constructive feedback which our NSDF selector had provided us with following our original run. Relationships between characters were thus further developed, and the cast began to concentrate on the impact of their words when speaking to the audience, thinking carefully about the direct manner with which they delivered them. Owing to circumstances beyond our control, we lost a cast member and therefore had to shuffle around actors so that we performed with two 'bombers' at the festival, rather than three as in our original performances. This experience tested the cast, and gave them a new awareness of their own role, as well as how they would now interact with the other characters following this switch around. The chance to enter the production to NSDF allowed the cast and director access to this invaluable feedback which we would not have been given so honestly from the friends and family who came to supports production run. The opportunity to then take this feedback on board and tweak the production is something that students rarely have the chance to do and for that we are incredibly grateful for the support we have had to get us to the festival.

Further to this, the need to raise sufficient funds in order to make this a reality has given myself, the producer, valuable experience in writing funding applications and pitching to potential sponsors which is already proving useful for current projects.

Awards

Joseph Henshaw was awarded the NSDF13 prize for Audio-Visual Design as an acknowledgement of his achievement in producing provocative, relevant and hard hitting projections that were an integral part of the aesthetic of this production, and served to create a unique and sophisticated interpretation of the 'images of hell' in Stephen's text. This industry recognised award will not only be beneficial to Joseph in his personal career aspirations, but has also helped to put WUDS on the map as a society capable of producing high-calibre technical productions.

Reviews of 'Pornography' at NSDF

The production was well received by many professionals and students at the festival, as the following reviews demonstrate.

Kevin Berry for The Stage

<http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/38361/nsdf-pornography>

“Two years ago at the NSDF there was a memorable production of Simon Stephens’ Pornography, a play that looks at the cracks in society in the hours leading up to the London bombings. George Want, of Warwick University, was in the audience and he was inspired to try a different approach when an opportunity arose - and now it has.

Having the theatre-in-the round gives Want a head start and he takes full advantage, sitting his actors in the front rows and bringing them into the centre when their turn comes. High screens have news footage played in short, almost percussive bursts. Stories steadily reveal their intricacies and secrets.

Want has got the best out of some already committed actors. Maria Hildebrand’s playing of an elderly woman who is detached from life and society is exemplary. The poor soul does not know what has happened because no one bothers to speak to her. Nima Taleghani as a bomber is so surprisingly and frighteningly normal.”

Andrew Haydon for Noises Off

“When does a contemporary drama become a period piece? In the case of Simon Stephens’s 2007 play Pornography, the answer seems to be: roughly five years.

I first saw Pornography on 29 September 2008 in its [world première production directed by Sebastian Nübling](#) in Nitra, Slovakia, the night that the US congress/senate voted against the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act. The American government refused to “bail out Wall St”. The US Stock Market dropped 8 per cent, the largest drop since Black Monday in 1987. The narrative arc of the decade had just taken a sudden decisive turn. The “War on Terror”, Tony Blair, George W. Bush, were on their way out. Ahead lay Global recession, Barack Obama, the credit crunch, David Cameron, austerity, George Osborne and the triple-dip recession.

Seeing Pornography again at NSDF ‘11 in Nikki Moss’s Cambridge ADC production, I think I unavoidably ended up at least partially watching her vivid, physical theatre interpretation through the filter of that original production.

Seeing [Pornography again in Edinburgh '12](#), performed by Organised Crime Theatre, what was most striking was how, in Britain's post-Olympic afterglow (hell, even reading Stephens's own soppy pro-Olympic ceremony tweets), it felt like the UK had actually played a blinder with the London Games. That at least one of the processes described in the play – London getting the Games – had come full circle. What is feared as an open wound in the play: “the heart being ripped out of the East End, etc.” turned out to have been a largely healing process.

So what of seeing Pornography at NSDF '13? **George Want's version is the most intelligent production of the play I've seen since Nubling's original.** What Want has done is to take the “four monologues, two duologues and one list offering short descriptions of the fifty-two people killed in the 2005 London bombings” and intercut them so that they run more-or-less chronologically, so that we as an audience move through the piece toward the bombings with the characters. Stories that begin days away from 7/7, before even Live8, start first, stories that begin nearer to the events begin nearer the explosions. It's not *quite* chronological, though, the bomber – played here in another astute move by both a young vaguely middle-eastern looking young man with an urban British accent and a young woman with a Northern Irish accent.

The cast begin seated in the front rows of the Stephen Joseph theatre in-the-round. First lines were delivered spotlighted but seated. There was a sense that they were part of “us”. That they could just as easily have been us. At the same time, there was a total disconnect. They were in the spotlights and had learnt the lines.

In fact, for me, **one of the most exciting things about Want's production was the extent to which it anatomised Stephens's text.** This was a forensic textual analysis, and the staging reflected this. This was a post-critical Pornography. What was fascinating about this – about the almost perpetually deferred gratification – was the way that it stopped we in the audience ever getting too embedded in any of Stephens's heartstring-tugging narratives. We're not seduced along with brother and sister in their helter-skelter romance or drawn in by the would-be schoolboy dictator. Instead, we see them, fractured, as symptoms of a wider whole.

One by-product of this was to further confirm something to me that I've wondered about for a while – whether the brother-sister incest plot should actually be there at all. Maybe it's just my own slightly left-of-centre moral thinking, and I know Simon discusses the narratives in terms of “transgressions” rather than “sins” or similar, but I've never been able to shake off the feeling that the terrorism is, in part, an implicit judgment on the morality, or immorality of the other characters. And, as it happens, I actually quite like the brother and sister.

That might be due, in part, to the fact that in the first version I saw, the sister was played by a large, ginger, male actor and the drinking scene involved them pouring roughly five bottles of wine over each other's heads. There's also the fact that their seduction feels so aching, passionate and, well, real. Perhaps that's what they're really doing in there – even though they're not *meant* to get it together, they make the most visceral connection of any of the putative relationships mooted by any of the characters. Well, by any of the characters save for the bomber (or bomber(s?) here), whose connection with the 52 names is about as real and literally visceral as is possible.

Want's cast inhabit their characters with conviction in the midst of Elizabeth Leech's set of hanging cables which simultaneously manages to evoke the destroyed tunnels of the London Underground, the Tube map, and the inside of the internet. Student and Lecturer conduct their first dialogue over Skype, projected onto flying buttresses of polythene sheeting connecting the upper rows of seating to the lighting rig. The pathos of an Old Lady's socially awkward request for some chicken that she could smell walking back from the centre of London on 7/7 still puts a lump in my throat. The list of names – here nearly at the end, but book-ended by the Old Lady's last line – still chokes me.

But where does all this leave me, or an audience, watching Pornography – a piece already mooted (and arguably proven) as "[the new 4:48 Psychosis of student drama](#)"? On one level, you'd think it might get supplanted in the affections of student drama societies by Stephens's newer play Morning. But then, does Morning really have the same seductive openness? The "throw it all in the air and let the chips fall where they may" attitude? Or is there something more about these particular stories, of bullying, stalking, condemning, begging, yearning, dismissing – and ultimately killing and dying – wrapped up in such a febrile recent week of history that will keep Pornography irresistible for years to come?"

The Future for WUDS, and the Pornography Cast and Team

Following the festival, WUDS have successfully secured a slot in C Venues at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2013 for a production of 'Vinegar Tom', a result which the society's performance at NSDF certainly helped in achieving. The production team for this show are already putting skills learnt in the festival workshops into use on this forthcoming production, and there is no doubt that WUDS will be submitting future work into the festival.

Individual team members have also had significant success, with one gaining a reference to an MA course at a drama school, and another being offered paid employment as a VoiceOver artist, all of which are direct results of their participation in the festival.

Thank You

On behalf of the production team and cast, I would like to thank IATL for their generous support of this production. Without the opportunity to apply for funding sources such as this within the university system, taking 'Pornography' to the National Student Drama Festival 2013 certainly would not have been possible. The Performance Festival Bursary has enabled a large team and cast to greatly develop their transferable skills, meet other like-minded individuals, and to enhance the reputation of WUDS as a society which produces high-quality student theatre, whilst all the while having an enjoyable and rewarding festival experience.