

Bull

Venue: theSpace @ Niddry Street
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The subtlety of each character's costume only hints at the level of detail that shapes this production of Bull. Thomas (Jake McGarry), the horribly relatable office worker, is dressed in a suit that's just slightly ill-fitting, a tie that's just too slack to be acceptable, and an ensemble that's just too grey to escape the idea of shabbiness - although, pitifully, he claims it is his "best suit". Isobel (Nayia Anastasiadou) and Tony (Jamie Stewart) wear tailored suits in sharper monochrome tones, slick and sleek with a burst of blood-red in the form of a tie or a pocket square. Over the course of the play, the well-intentioned Thomas is toyed with and torn apart by his 'colleagues' as they await a meeting with their boss, in a psychological and disturbing dissection of both office politics and playground bullying.

The play pulsates with tension, and while this is partly down to the quality of the writing, it is of course the cast who are truly responsible for the visceral, pounding vitality of this piece. Jamie Stewart commands the stage, inhabiting both his character and the space impressively. He and Nayia Anastasiadou together form an insidious partnership, and their performances are enthralling: together they are utterly repulsive and nail-bitingly frustrating to watch, and of course that's the point. Together with Alan Patterson as the boss, Carter, they present an unbreakable triad of inescapable pettiness and humiliation. Anastasiadou is absolutely cutting in her delivery, toying with Thomas, and Patterson responds with an equally absorbing performance.

Dialogue is punctuated - perhaps, in some moments, defined - by the sound of footsteps on the stage. The clunky, shuffling, barely audible noise of Thomas' shoes; the pointed, clipping heels worn by Isobel; the commanding crack of Tony's smart leather footwear; and finally, the tense drumbeat of Carter's (Alan Patterson) footsteps. Each character's entrance, exit, and presence on the stage is shaped by this, as well as the skill of their performance. It really is a testament to each cast member that, by the end of the play, I detest every one of them - even Thomas, for whom a kind of irritated sympathy is evoked as he tries to engage, then bargain with, then reject the advances of his co-workers (unsuccessfully, of course).

The stage is used well, and each actor makes good use of the space available to them. In one scene, the four characters stand in striking formation around a chair, and in another, Anastasiadou and Stewart circle McGarry as he sits, helpless, between them. Thomas moves aimlessly around the stage as Isobel and Tony corner him, closing in relentlessly. Every movement is deliberate and terrifying, with McGarry merely subject to the actions of the others.

Bull is at once quite surreal and biting down-to-earth. The tension builds throughout and becomes inescapably uncomfortable. This is a truly horrible watch, and one that you should see.

Bull is a very professional play about very professional matters. Mike Bartlett's play dives straight into the office, as we witness bullying in the workplace and gain a sense of what it feels like. Arbery Productions give a cold performance that leaves a chilling taste of corporate attitudes and the heartless echelons of office hierarchies.

Three is always an awkward number in conversation, as any dialogue leaves one person excluded and quickly feeling ostracised. Bartlett uses this to quickly establish a dynamic in this trio: Isobel and Tony are competitive businesspeople, who derive joy from mocking the weakness of their colleague Thomas. It's a simple premise, but one which builds into hyperbole as Thomas steadily crumbles under the weight of their psychological attacks.

Thomas stands out well from the small cast. Nayia Anastasiadou, Alan Patterson and Jamie Stewart all smart with soulless professionalism. "You're not doing yourself any favours using emotive language", Thomas is told. Everything that Isabella, Tony and Carter say could be a lie; but Thomas is terrible at lying and flaps under the weight of their snappy mind games. There's an uneasy sense that he's endlessly being tricked, and yet Bartlett has connivingly shown how the traps Thomas falls into are unavoidable.

As Tony, Jamie Stewart is the perfectly smarmy, condescending, "sheer muscular wanker" of the office. There's a joyous twinkle in his eye as he plays with Thomas, and he walks with his hand on his stomach, exuding confidence. This casting provides a strong contrast with Thomas, "the short flabby one". Jake McGarry sweats and frazzles under the heat of the mounting pressure, his posture bent and weak and relentlessly failing to fit into the cold, unforgiving pace of this workplace. Nayia Anastasiadou gleefully twists the knife of his upset; she is stone cold evil, and torments him until he joins in the fight against himself. As their boss, Carter is the devil himself; his harsh features bring out the sickening inhumanity of this firm, as he disdainfully plays with redundancy.

Bull was first performed in 2013, and here is performed as I imagined it was then. Arbery Productions don't seem a fresh interpretation or creative innovation, and it often just feels like four separate actors performing on stage. In a festival such as the Fringe, Bull therefore stands out due to Arbery's lack of bravery, which leaves a stale taste.

As director, Adam Tomkins has created a perfect hell, complete with demons and power suits. The set is sparse - only a chair - yet their costumes tastefully capture their characters and less is absolutely more. Sound is used sparingly, only shuddering a bassline to emphasise precise moments of destruction and inner turmoil.

Mike Bartlett's original is performed tightly and cleanly, leaving no room for misunderstanding over the message Bull makes.