

 **Fourplay** at **Three Minute Theatre** by Paul Thompson and Phil Pearson Reviewed by Stephen Bowler April 2016

Four short stories about love, disaster, life and redemption from two Manchester playwrights staged in one evening in the city centre. Each play is fifteen minutes long, performed by up and coming talent from England and Ireland.

First-up is **Melted**, by Paul Thompson, a gently redemptive tale from a Lidl-ish store. Clumsy lothario Theo tests the patience of newly appointed manageress Carla. He's a noisy oaf, destined for a hard landing with reality. She is magnanimous, putting his egoistic bluster into perspective with lovingly prepared helpings of pasta and not a little feminine deference. A happy ending awaits at the checkout.

Next up is **Four Decembers Ago**, by Phil Pearson, which addresses the ineffability of love as experienced or not in childhood and then as an adult. Cannily crafted as a series of time-shifting scenes, Michael's emotional topography is merely suggested, yielding a character who knows himself even less than we know him. Hints of dis-affective mothering as the source of his own dis-affective husbanding are as fragmentary as the idea that such attachments might be less liberating than we imagine. The love he seeks eludes him; but perhaps it eludes all of us, is the implication.

In the second half we get two more helpings from the same writers. Paul Thompson's **Swap** is no less naturalistic and linear than his first offering, with a similarly sparky style but also a larger thematic canvas. Two friends get together for an evening of darkly daft reminiscence that concludes with a husband-swapping scene, much like the **bed trick** in **Measure for Measure**. And lo, it comes to pass that nocturnal novelties wrought by deception bring forth a painful truth. Such are the wages of sin.

The best is saved for last. **To you the son** by Phil Pearson is about Vincent, more sinned against than sinner, or so he imagines. As in **Four Decembers**, the plot is reflexively allusive, revealing a character who is the author of his own undoing and not a little self-pitiful in the process. Infidelity is again associated with childhood experience, though this time the father. **We're weak people**, says Vincent, who demonstrates just how abased he is in the entirely fitting dramatic conclusion.

I really enjoyed the short story format, and appreciated the contrast between the two playwrights styles. All the stories will no doubt bed-in and gain fluency and punch with repeated telling. They certainly deserve a wider audience, though the **Three Minute Theatre** at Afflecks Palace is an ideal, intimate venue in the city centre to kick-start this kind of offering.

A broader point. Masculinity is now a cultural negative. Men boys in particular are routinely monstered for being boys/men. Quite why is too large a topic: suffice to say, the problem with men is necessarily also a problem for women you can't have one without the other - and I was struck by how this theme undergirds all four plays. In this respect I conclude that this is precisely the sort of story-telling we need, reflecting back on us the dilemmas of our time, with all the experimental immediacy those dilemmas so urgently demand. And at 5.50, **FOURPLAY** is a steal, giving the lie to anyone who would declare theatre aloof or inaccessible.