



J B Shorts 18

at **53two** , Manchester

Reviewed by **Matthew Dougall** October 2017

Manchester's theatrical institution, J B Shorts, a collaboration and collection of 6 15-minute plays written, directed and performed by resident theatre and TV talent, has made its way once again to a venue ideal for this type of event, 53Two.

Of all the J B Shorts I have previously seen, this evening certainly ranks among my most enjoyable. A good mix of styles and genres with an almost perfect running order was the first thing to impress; that, combined with the fact that the backdrop jumble of props this year were cleverly positioned so that they were all used in one or more of the plays, with the cast of the previous play setting up for the one following.

I suppose it is inevitable in an evening of 6 short plays you are going to enjoy some more than others, and some will leave a greater impression on you. The other thing is that sometimes TV writing / directing / acting doesn't necessarily transfer so easily to the stage, and so without doubt I preferred those this evening which had a greater theatrical quality about them. Of course all art is subjective, we all know this, so as previously hinted at, this evening was indeed very enjoyable overall with some of the best acting and directing I have seen from a J B Shorts evening.

The first play to go was ***Artistic Differences***, written by **Lindsay Williams** and directed by **Mickey Jones**

. It tells the story of a faded but famous music duo, 'Pharmacy', who, between them and their new manager, engineer their own comeback. Things don't go quite right with this though and so, live on stage of their opening comeback concert, they play their new material to the annoyance of said new manager. It was a nice idea, and well written. The two actors playing the drug-taking, rock-n-roll life-style band members were excellently cast, as they were both also required to sing and play the guitar. A great start to the evening therefore was provided by **Keeley Fitzgerald**

,
John Mackie

, and

Stephen Donald

.

There followed a play tackling the tricky subject of abortion. We see a group of Irish women on board a ship moored just inside international waters, willing and ready to terminate their pregnancies - something I have just learned is still against the law in Ireland. There is a twist and a spike in the story which didn't end how I expected it to. Excellent. Written by **Jan McVerry** and directed by

Megan Marie-Griffith

, the strong cast were

Amy Forrest

,

Clare Cameron

,

Wendy Patterson

,
Anna Jabarteh
and
Leon Tagoe
.

Last before the interval was a romantic pastiche called Forever Eighties by Dave Simpson and Diane Whitley. A nice idea having the younger versions of themselves re-enacting their cathartic moment; however the end was a disappointment for me. Nicely played though by **Kerry Willson-Parry**

,
Martin Wenner

,
Jennifer Hulman
and
Peter Stone
.

After the interval and we came back to watch ***Playmates*** by **Trevor Suthers**. We see two adults playing and acting like two young children, and as the play turns sour they immediately become the man and wife that they are, and we see how their marriage is not as strong as it should be, and the little things which nag relationships have been allowed to become big things. Nicely acted by **Ki mberly Hart-Simpson**
and
Peter Ash
.

However, for me, the best two pieces of the evening were saved until last. The penultimate was a rather clever idea of incorporating internet, specifically Facebook, commentary style and behaviour into everyday conversation. The frightening thing about this is that we are not too far away from this happening, as I hear from time to time young teenagers chatting with each other with the occasional vocalised 'lol' or 'OMG', and if facial expressions were emojis then the teenagers win hands down! #justsayin' (lol). Written by **Pete Kerry** and **James Quinn**, and directed by

Martin Gibbons

, the four cast members of

Lee Toomes

,

Hannah Ellis-Ryan

,

Greg Kelly

and

Victoria Oxley

were put through their - oh wait a minute, I've just seen an article on the 10 best photos of catbearding! - paces.

And finally the evening came to a more sober but still comedic and clever conclusion with a short piece with dementia as the subject matter. ***Flotsam And Gypsum*** by **Peter Bowker** and directed by

Chris Lawson

, saw a young plasterer working in an old lady's flat. The lady has dementia and confuses him with her own son which has a rather hard impact on him. The most interesting thing for me here was that I could see elements of my own mother in this character, and so it was indeed very real and quite close to home. How much did she know already, and how much was she simply playing the dementia card? Very touching and a lovely way to end the evening, played superbly by

William Fox

and

Val Tagger

.

Once again, a huge success, and a highly enjoyable evening. Thank you.