



[My Baby Girl](#)

By Jane The Foole Theatre Company

Reviewed by [Paul Thompson](#) December 2014

It's always a pleasure to witness the spirit of new writing doffing its cap to the classics. Much of what the creative cubs are trying out on the boards owes a disproportionate debt to cinema – multiple locations, sub-plots; and snappy scenes bouncing through time like a pre-illness Stephen Hawking on a space hopper. All well and good if you have the luxury of an editing suite, but overwhelming for an auditorium burdened by transition overload.

Poet **Amy McCauley**'s brave and ultimately disturbing ***My Baby Girl*** – showcased at the Northern Quarter's supercool

Three Minute Theatre

– has a bracingly Aristotelian unity: one story in one place covering no more than a few hours. It knows exactly what it is and what form the tale must take – a play. And for this, the piece deserves – an apt word considering the Greek influence – kudos.

The first act is difficult to fault. We're at a dinner party sullied by an oppressively awkward atmosphere. **Harry (Mark Brent)** bounds past us down the mini not-really-an-aisle on the left, avoiding the bags and drinks nobody imagined would become such a flagrant breach of health and safety.

Post-haste it's understood that we're not at one of those theatrical soirees where the tension simmers beneath the surface and slowly but surely raises its unattractive bonce. With a short address about how one starts and ends life with defecation, Harry reveals himself as proto-obnoxious, anti-social and more than a teensy bit drunk.

Right off the starting pistol's bang, the squirm-inducing strained relations are in your face. Harry subjects guests **Hector** and **Suzanne (Aj Akande and Helen Meadmore)** to excruciating rudeness, invasions of space and poor behaviour bordering on the trippy – while his unfathomable co-host and wife

Sandra

(

Charlotte Rhodes

) largely produces no more surprise than if he'd told a slightly risqué joke. There is a question mark hanging over director

Laura Harris

and Brent's choice for Harry's dynamic: I don't think the pages demanded an immediate launch into full-on nutjob; a bit of restraint – maybe the creepiness of a man trying to contain his contempt – could have been a more engaging starting point. For one thing, it's hard to buy that

Hector and Suzanne don't attempt to leave earlier.

Alas that can be forgiven because – at this point – we're treated to a shed full of drama as we wonder what the hell is going on behind these neatly crafted lines. The actors have been given plenty of acting to do. The reveal comes at about the right time, and what we have been a party to starts to make a modicum of sense. Soon after, the action builds to a climax in which the appearance of a gun turns the meal into a siege. And I go to what the announcer refers to as “the comfort room” very impressed with a swift, compact and intriguing set up.

While there is nobody – in my eyes – to root for as it stands, I return to my seat hungry to note how the problem of the second act will be conquered. Questions swim about my head: is Hector really a rapist? At the moment, we are led to believe that Hector is telling the truth – and the dalliance with Harry and Sandra's eighteen-year-old daughter was a consensual if ill-advised affair. Consequently, the pride-fuelled and maniacal Harry, we imagine, has over-reacted with allegations of sexual violation. I'm convinced Hector will be outed as a real-deal sex offender. I'm sure we will be in due course, despite ourselves, softening our position on Harry's vigilante justice.

Then it arrives. This is the big turn – I'm certain. An abundantly intoxicated Harry leaves the gun on the table and exits. Suzanne – by now sporting Harry's grotesque and deliberate wardrobe malfunction that has haunted for too long with no attempt by the recipient to correct it – claims the weapon and trains it on her husband. Harry is on his way back. We will now find out a deeper truth. Definitely. Did Hector once rape Suzanne? Will Hector confess to raping the hosts' “baby girl”? What will Harry be like when the tables have turned and power is in the hands of another?

Well, we never find out. As Harry re-enters, Suzanne, inexplicably, returns the gun to whence she took it, and obligingly reverts to victim status. A missed opportunity is this. Because proceedings return to as before, the story resolves itself in terms of an escalating, shocking and shakily motivated revenge spectacle. The drama has been replaced with the voyeurism of unjust cruelty. And the inclusion of a payback rape, where not even the potential perpetrator is the one directly punished, is an odd decision seeing as it's never made explicit that this is a story about rape.

It seems, from where we are sitting, to be about a man who simply wants to believe his little princess has been wronged, and deny her involvement in an adult pairing. Without confirmation of Hector's sin, the audience is simply left with the possibly unsatisfying message: "Some people are right psycho... what can you do?" A couple of watchers in my eye line were clearly uncomfortable with the culmination of this graphic retribution. Since it's difficult for fellow victims – and those of a more sensitive nature – to sit through this ordeal, there is an argument it has to be entirely necessary and justified: central to the telling. I have doubts as to whether it was.

So that was my main beef. It lost its way somewhere around the final quarter (a lot later than a lot of fresh product, to its credit) and finished with too many loose ends untied – with maybe too many issues touched upon and not fully explored. There was nothing else wrong with it. Not one second of it was dull. A wealth of talent has realised this tight, highly intelligent, thought-provoking and debate-inducing chunk of script that just begs, for me, a quick spring clean. But to the squeamish: beware!