



Summer. Autumn. Winter. Spring.

A [Quarantine](#), [HOME](#) and [Contact](#) co-production, supported by SICK!
Festival, at Old Granada Studios, Manchester
Reviewed by [Stephen Bowler](#) March 2016

Summer. Autumn. Winter. Spring. is an epic work performed in a large studio space by dozens of ordinary people including – crucially – the audience itself. The pace is relaxed, the setting comfortable and the mood convivial. Seven hours fly by.

Summer opens with disambiguation; we, the audience, are addressed, described and engaged, blurring the boundaries between us and them. The style is amiably non-confrontational, as if it were all a coincidence, but a contract is nonetheless drawn-up, setting an emotional tone for all that follows. I'll return to the contract in a moment.

A huge cast ranging from toddlers to senior citizens follow cues and respond to questions. The ringmaster-cum-director is no less cordial with the cast than she was with the audience, eliciting the whimsical and factual whilst eschewing statements of value, establishing the quotidian as a realm in its own right. This theme is cleverly reinforced by alternating between objective and subjective representations; 'looking at' people without words, and then 'listening to' them as they describe themselves and their experiences. Objective, corporeal representations tend to be distinguished from words spoken by persons standing still, responding to direct prompts. After a while the constituent elements of person-hood come together and finally – at the end of Summer – we get a real whole person responding in larger terms to questions that remain, nonetheless, more empirical than spiritual.

Autumn is an altogether different offering. The hanger-like TV studio (once home of Coronation St) is transformed into a kind of po-mo bring-and-buy, in which we, the audience, get to play and speak and participate in all sorts of ways, from round table debate in the company of 'expertise', to ping pong to 'a practising Muslim' who is also 'a sceptical clairvoyant'. Most importantly, there is a bar and there is food, allowing all and sundry to mix and match at will. It's like Fresher's Fair without the Army Cadets.

Winter is a short film about Mandy, who talks frankly about the hardship but also the rewards of life. In contrast to the dispassionate tone of the other pieces there is pathos here, an emotional connect enabled – paradoxically – by that most stylised of forms, cinema. We warm to Mandy as a decent human being and cannot but feel compassion for her suffering, but at the same time we get to know her through a highly polished, professionally edited medium.

Where *Winter* flagged-up the sorrows of life ending, **Spring** is bursting with renewal and vitality. It is performed by nine pregnant women. When did you last/ever see nine pregnant women in

one place? Even at NCT classes I never saw nine; all together, positively, beautifully, palpably blooming. An aura of plenitude and joy is enlarged by a sea of shiny, big, billowy-pillow-like balloons through which the women wade, initially parading their fecund forms and then voicing a series of concerns and queries about what motherhood will mean for them. Intriguingly – encouragingly! – the input of ‘Dad’ gets more than one mention. The vulnerability of the pregnant women is as tangible as the sense of destinies reconfigured. Spring draws to a close with the Goldberg Variations playing in the background – an appropriately transcendent note to close.

Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring might be understood as a rolling programme of provocations, designed to disrupt everyday assumptions and puncture surface appearances. It isn't theatre, as conventionally understood, with characters in roles taking us through a dramatic arc in terms of a script, but neither is it an absurdist ‘happening’ with no agenda beyond the moment. Indeed, the apparently affectless authenticity of ordinary people reading lines from a screen and seeming to be just-who-they-are-and-no-more is belied by an impressively slick schedule and very tight direction. After seven hours the event finished bang on time. Somebody, somewhere, had it all nailed down, rather like Christof, the dark genius behind *The Truman Show*

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OK; maybe not Christof – too conspiratorial. Let's just say there is more to emotional provocation than emotional experience. The direction of travel is somewhere rather than nowhere. A dramatic arc exists, as an end point to which the production must travel. It needs to be this way to keep from falling apart. Scenes must unfold and then progress to another that will reveal itself in a way no less structured. And all those scenes must resonate more or less clearly with an audience's self-understanding.

None of this is absent from *Summer. Autumn. Winter. Spring*. But at the same time, in blurring

the boundary between audience and performer a metatheatrical clause is smuggled into the proceedings. The audience is invited to share the symbolic space as co-creators, equals – friends even. This is the moral contract, a shared division of emotional labour that is warmly non-judgemental and apparently un-affected, populated with people who are ‘just like us’. Which indeed, they are. And by the same token, we are just like them. The script simply invites us to recognise and affirm each other.

Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring unpacks the suitcase of life and finds nothing more than the very things you’d expect to find anyway. A demotic naturalism steers clear of the weird exoticisms so beloved of performance artists and sociologists these days. It is almost anthropological, curatorial even, and none the worse for it. Highly original, with a lot more to it than may at first seem the case, this is a fun, sociable way to pack four seasons into seven hours.

There are two more performances of the quartet on the 2nd and 3rd April - check with [Contact](#) or [HOME](#) for returns.