



[The Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner](#)

A [Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse](#) Production

Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) November 2012

“You only have power over people so long as you don’t take everything away from them. But when you’ve robbed a man of everything, he’s no longer in your power – he’s free again”. **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**

In Alan Sillitoe’s classic story of freedom, Colin Smith the protagonist is a free man by this

definition and chooses to make his own history but not in conditions of his own choosing. In doing so, he exercises his free will and demonstrates his resilience and determination.

Elliott Barnes-Worrell as Colin Smith certainly goes the distance and delivers an adrenaline rush in more ways than one, in this compelling and brave adaptation in a contemporary setting, of an Alan Sillitoe classic. The adaptation is by BAFTA winning and Olivier Award nominated playwright **Roy Williams** OBE (*Sucker Punch, Fallout, Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads*).

The play brings to life the biting realism that Sillitoe so vividly depicted in his 1959 novel and this production sets it in the present day. **Barnes-Worrell**, in his first professional performance, won me over with a superb, muscular and agitated performance, most of which is spent running on a treadmill, word-perfect and never breathless. He emerges from several long running scenes, dives straight into flashback sets without breaking sweat. You can tell he is a long distance runner in real life – and he certainly runs away with the prize for the stand-out-performance!

Sillitoe, a writer with emotional power and a soul rooted in the Nottingham working class community, originally wrote this as a short story in a larger collection. The tone in the book is bleak and typically defiant, angry and bitter with occasional relief from Sillitoe's sardonic humour, whereas this new production is much more affable. It has previously been adapted for a film of the same title, with the part of Smith played by Tom Courtenay (1962), but this version, despite following the same structure as the book and having the same central character in Colin Smith, is a world apart from both the book and the 1962 film.

Whereas Sillitoe gave a new voice to the angry, white working-class, in Williams's version which seems to be set in the black community of south London, we hear the voice and patois of the post-riot black urban youth of today; "cops" become "feds" and there are lots of "ya get me's" and "innits" and swaggering cheeky street slang thrown in. The youth wear their pants half way down their backsides and display a very different arrogance (as well as arse) to that of a 1950's Colin Smith. They seem to be part of a protest about young people with no prospects, instead of in a tale depicting how one can personally and defiantly handle oppression and imprisonment and gain a certain kind of freedom in a spectacular display of free will and a standoff with authority, which is how I interpreted the original story.

The voice of David Cameron using the ubiquitous "L" word (legacy) and harping on about "justice" plays out from the television in the Smiths' living room, and he sounds every bit as pompous and out-of-place and touch as he does whenever he speaks, with the gulf between "them and us" neatly illustrated.

Despite one or two minor criticisms, as a fan of the writing in the original book, I thoroughly enjoyed it. It works as a new story based on an original and is skilfully produced, artistically directed (Marcus Romer), creatively scripted without being too preachy. The set is visually stunning in its simplicity and cleverly uses semi-transparent screening that allows new voices and characters on stage whilst at the same time keeping them discretely in the background. It has vitality and spirit in buckets thanks to the energetic and talented cast.

