



[Thrasher](#) by Conor McKee

Performed at [Royal Exchange Studio](#) , directed by Wyllie Longmore

Reviewed by [Emma Short](#) October 2011

Conor McKee's latest production *Thrasher* is a potent mix of the failings and warmth of people which explores themes of faith, identity, values and responsibility. Amid the chaos that emerges through the play it knits together a rich fast paced story that both warms and disgusts. Sprinkled throughout with dark humour it captivates and entertains, taking one on a journey both familiar and uncertain.

The play documents twenty four hours in the lives of six characters set in the heart of Manchester. It begins with the morning after the night before. So we start at the end, framing the context in which the preceding events evolved and then end once again with the opening sequence. This powerful device highlights the circular momentum throughout the play in the choices and reactions of the characters, playing with the line between free will and determinism.

The lighting design directs our attention during this sequence by illuminating the characters in turn. Dialogue begins with the ringing of phones, stirring of waking couples, emergence of arguments and soliloquy of a solitary soul in an armchair. This is the aperitif, hinting at the flavour of what is to come, then serving as the inevitable digestif.

The plot oozes a fatalistic sense of karmic energy. Vic (Cathy Shiel) decided long ago what she was good for, so the hatred and aggression towards those she likes to manipulate ensures she remains in the relationship that she deserves. Colin's (Darren John Langford) drug habit and poisonous charm makes him think he can have all he wants, whenever he wants it. We wait to see if he can transcend the hedonism that he thinks frees him or remains trapped by it. For quick talking loser and loveable rogue Lee (Ryan Greaves) the karma is unkind. His path is marked and paved with every lie that rolls effortlessly off his tongue leading him further into a troubling situation of poignant inevitability.

The play doesn't condemn all the characters to this fate however, and thankfully offers them the hope of redemption in the form of chance meetings and moments of possibility. Frank (Declan Wilson) and Jenny's (Claire Disley) chance meeting allows them both, to confide in each other as strangers. However life is never simple, and thus the play doesn't leave us with a tidy conceit. We find ambiguity within Chloe's (Katie McArdie) journey where McKee tests our sense of justice in a compelling and sympathetic way. So whilst some suffer or instigate the ills of the evening, others share moments of solace and catharsis.

The cast performances are powerful and full of pathos. McKee has them reveal a pivotal story from their past at that most poignant of hours - 4am, which completes a picture of why they are where they are now. The generous portrayal of the characters however doesn't excuse their behaviour but serves to underline the circumstances and choices that trap them.

The stage design is perfectly subtle (a credit to [Jane Leach](#)). Rows of fallen linen panels indicate interior and exterior reflecting the warmth and chaos being played out before us. This minimalist approach pencils a frame which is filled by the magnitude of the performance itself, delicately complimenting without distracting. The intricacy of the stitched linen echoes the depth in which we come to see the characters whilst the fragility of the material itself reflects their delicate conditions. This theme is reinforced by Michael Cretu's score in which the depth of the bass from the strings brings emotional gravity, whilst its distinctly Hispanic feel combines to give a weightless ephemeral quality, teetering between the two throughout, a motif the director has artfully conveyed in every aspect of the play.

This is a modern play and as such elevates the mobile phone into an ironic metaphor, and is a comment on how unhelpful these ubiquitous gadgets are. Each character only achieves some degree of awareness when either deliberately, or by chance, their mobile phones are malfunctioning. Thrasher is McKee's long awaited second play which I think was a great success. The hour and a half performance takes you through the journey of each character with enough insight to step into their shoes. The pace and delivery is stupendous, and left me with a feeling that life in the modern city seems to flash by in a chaotic stupor leaving little room for unnecessary incidents to occur through a disconnection with self and lack of empathy with others. A tight and succinct production with some very clever and inventive plot devices & direction, to be seen by all that think they trust themselves & their decisions, but could uncover more of unconscious motives.

It plays again in Camden People's Theatre 7th and 8th October - details on [Conor McKee's](#) website.