



**[Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster](#)**

**[Royal Exchange](#), Manchester**

**Reviewed by [Catherine Smyth](#) September 2012**

**‘Now, make this known’**

Those four words echoed around the auditorium as two actors silently left the stage. The packed audience at Manchester’s Royal Exchange was sitting attentively. They waited for a minute not sure whether to applaud or just to leave the theatre in the same eerie silence.

The Radio 4 play has been adapted for stage and presents a powerful real life drama. It gives a

voice to the peace-loving unique individual that was Sophie. The 20-year-old gap year student whose life was cruelly stamped out in a gang attack in a Bacup park in 2007.

Sophie and her boyfriend Rob Maltby, who followed a Goth-style fashion, had been walking home when they chose to walk into the park. Firstly Rob was attacked by a gang of five. They kicked and stamped on his head and face. Sophie was there next victim and such was the force of the kicks that reigned down on her imprints of the training shoes were left on her face. She died 13 days later. The only reason given for the attack was that they were dressed different to their attackers.

Set on a simple stage, the role of Sophie's mum Sylvia is played by Coronation Street's Julie Hesmondhalgh. She sits in the centre in an armchair while around her on a raised grass platform and a park bench her daughter Sophie, played by Rachel Austin, struts and strides.

Through his sharp and clever poetry, Simon Armitage gives Sophie the chance tell her own story. Her Lancashire lilt fills the auditorium with tales of her childhood, but then a subtle sound akin to thunder warns the audience that this story is becoming darker. Every word of the poetry was beautifully delivered as dressed in ripped tights, black lipstick and dark eye make-up, Rachel marches around her mother telling her story.

The poetry interweaves with the recollections of Sylvia leaving the audience in no doubt of the very real emotion of the situation. Tears were shed, tissues were hastily removed from bags,

men, women, young, old, all were visibly moved by the intimate production.

At times it felt as though mother and daughter were talking to one another and I, as an audience member, was an intruder. The tears shed by Julie on stage were genuine.

I hope every member of the audience will heed those final words uttered by Rachel and 'make this known'. The work of the Sophie Lancaster Foundation can only be strengthened by this play being staged. Sophie's story is one that should not be forgotten and her legacy must be a more tolerant society where prejudice is banished.

If this play helps to get that message across I hope to see it staged countrywide, however to maintain its impact it must be kept to similar small venues.