



Education Education Education at The Lowry
Reviewed by **Jane Turner** March 2018

Tony Blair is remembered for many things and blamed for everything from Iraq to the destruction of *Old Labour*. Educationalists remember him for his apparent focus on education embodied in his proclamation that Labour's top priority 'was, is and always will be education,

education, education', and this mantra is at the heart of this fast paced and entertaining comedy.

Feverishly performed by the **Wardrobe Ensemble** in the top-notch setting of the Lowry's Quay Theatre, this is set in the anarchic Wordsworth comprehensive school on the day after the 1997 Labour landslide. The election result proclaimed that things would 'only get better', and the play asks questions about what we are taught and who is to blame for the current state of the education system. It is a reminder of how the Blair government, despite over a decade of major investment, failed to deliver on its promise of an education utopia.

I can recall exactly where I was in 1997 when Labour won their landslide victory, ended 18 years in opposition and ousted John Major (that recent returnee to the Brexit political stage). It is one of those indelibly ingrained 'flashbulb memories'. Labour supporting friends of mine jumped with joy and in the aftermath, for a while, there was a general mood of euphoria and optimism not really seen since. As noted by a teacher in this play 'someone actually smiled on the bus'.

It is this *New Labour* (as opposed to *Old Labour*) government that brings hope to the desperate and frazzled staff in a school on the verge of special measures, who have been teaching in 'temporary' cabins for over 20 years with 15-year-old textbooks. The maniacal head teacher who, full of the optimism that seemed to grip the country at the time, proudly announces in assembly that 'our country has opted to invest in every one of you.'

Set in the era of Cool Britannia to an enjoyable and memory inducing nineties soundtrack that includes blasts of Take That, the Spice Girls, Black Box, The Verve and Oasis, with plenty of nineties references including Tamagotchi digital pets, the Big Breakfast Show and cassette players. It is observed through the eyes of Tobias a German teaching assistant on placement, who is shocked at the indiscipline and squabbling, and whose narration is delivered in a stereotypical Germanic style that starkly contrasts with the disorder of a school in meltdown, making his commentary all the more amusing.

The set consists of two classroom doors used to great effect for a multitude of entrances, and exits to the assortment of rooms and corridors in a large school. The ceiling made me laugh, as it was an almost perfect replica of the one in my old school, with chipped and battered polystyrene tiles - most of which were missing. The cast were all superb, changing roles, voices and uniforms, and jumping around with the liveliness and agitation I recognised from when I was a teacher; one minute confident and vivacious, the next mad and hysterical and on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

The story rummages among the trials and tribulations of the staff and students as they look to a future championed by *New Labour*. But it is not what they imagined. The staff find themselves jumping through hoop after hoop due to the constant changes to the curriculum, education theory and regular political interference. Instead of immersing their students in subject knowledge they chase exam results and police their values, thoughts, language and lifestyle. In place of discipline, there is kindness, inclusion and students are told they are all 'special'.

The performances are energetic and striking and the cast move the story along with vivacity, noise and pace. There are fights, stunts, chases and complex relationships all orchestrated to create the edginess and turmoil often found in understaffed, underfunded, overcrowded and generally out-of-control schools. Madcap moments are followed by periods of reflection during which the characters wrestle with themselves and each other about the point of education, and

complain about how the system controls and orchestrates their every move. The tension is manifest. The need for a serious debate about education is mooted and entertainingly delivered with intelligent insights and lots of laughs.

There are a few oddballs, as is usual in any school, including the archetypal discipline crazy deputy with an eye on the headship, the English teacher who demonstrates a love for the subject but fails to control a class of noisy adolescents and the usual mixture of disruptive and troublesome students.

After 75 minutes of frenetic activity, full of clever mockery and wit you are left in no doubt about the message it wants to deliver, which is that the education system has been ravaged by successive governments, teachers are leaving in their droves and children have been failed. The finger is firmly pointed in the direction of politicians and some parallels are drawn between the crumbling system of the 90s and that created by more recent austerity policies.

Schools funding shot up under New Labour, some facilities improved and many outmoded school buildings were brought up to date, specialisms were established and academies created, only to be closed several years later. But what this witty and melancholic exploration of the way education has changed tells us is how it has been used by politicians to achieve their political and economic goals and to promote their values. Teachers no longer focus on imparting subject knowledge or encouraging thinking. They spend most of their time helping students to pass exams to get a good job, and put emotional wellbeing above intellectual risk taking. Learning is no longer 'a good in itself' but a means to an end.

This is a funny, highly enjoyable and astutely observed tragi-comedy, performed by a talented team of just seven that teaches us an important lesson about the state of education.

This is a Wardrobe Ensemble, Royal & Derngate Northampton and Shoreditch Town Hall co-production directed by Jesse Jones and Helena Middleton, and designed by Lucy Sierra.