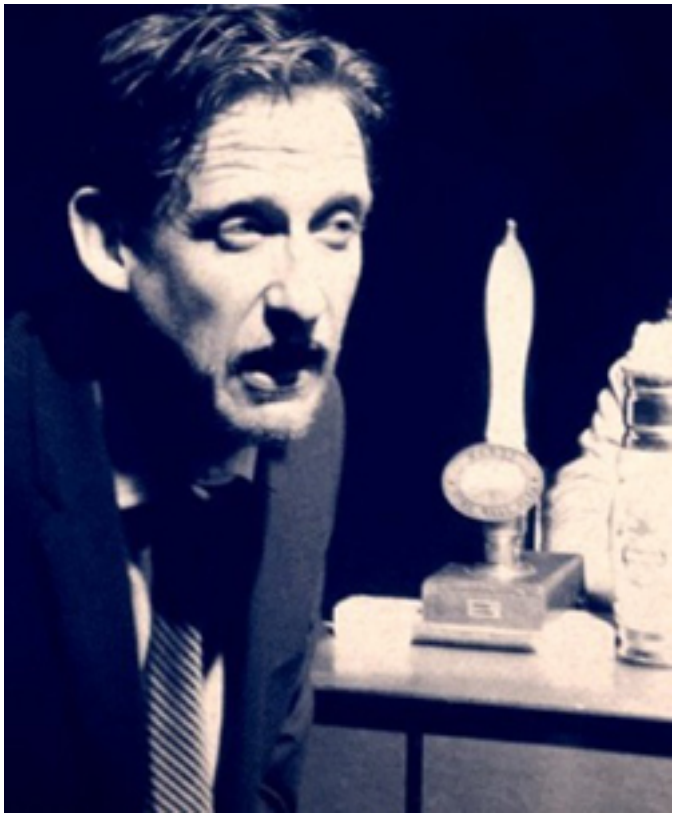

The Bubbler by Cathy Crabb in re:play Festival

Produced by The Library Theatre at The Lowry

Reviewed by Helen Nugent January 2013

Boss, mint, proper good, there aren't enough Manc adjectives in the world to describe the wonderfulness of Cathy Crabb's ***The Bubbler***. This is the kind of play you want to tell your mates about.

The Bubbler first opened at The Kings Arms in Salford last year. Thanks to the **re:play Festival**, a showcase of the best of Manchester's fringe now in its sixth year, there is another chance to see it. The two cast members have reunited for this run, staged by House of Orphans and Eat Theatre in one of The Lowry's bars. As site-specific shows go, it doesn't get any better: the play

is set in a pub.

For this reviewer at least, *The Bubbler* got off to an auspicious start. Frankly, any play that allows a character to use the word “ginnel” has got my vote. And when that character is Peter, a nihilistic, embittered, sour sod whose way with words had some audience members cackling like witches, then so much the better.

On the night I saw *The Bubbler*, snow lay on the ground outside and a frost hung in the air. Indoors, Neil Bell portrayed Peter’s icy hatred for man and beast with such relish that I swear a few globules of spit landed on my cheek. My god, what a performance. As he railed against a cold, cold world and rained down invective on all those who had crossed his path, Bell mesmerised everyone present, his stream of consciousness made all the more acute by the subtle reactions of Dan Street-Brown as barman Paul. The foil to Bell’s larger than life Satanic shop manager, Street-Brown played it just right – quiet, faintly amused and wary of his most unpleasant customer.

I could go on about Crabb’s exceptional use of the Northern vernacular, I could bore you with hyperbolic compliments on her flawless and unflabby dialogue - but that would spoil your enjoyment of what is a short and perfectly formed piece of dramatic writing. Suffice to say that if you want to see a mirror held up to society’s attitude to working class men and their creative counterparts, then stop at nothing to see *The Bubbler*. Using the recent riots and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*
as her inspiration, Crabb has written a play about the need for tolerance and the unhappy consequences of demonising the underclass.

In the interests of balance, I should air one teeny-tiny grievance. In a play where the writing was pared down and every word counted, I thought a short slot of dialogue about the cons of the benefit system sat awkwardly in a tableau which used humour and vitriol to make its point. But that's small beer. Go and see *The Bubbler*, pray for redemption, but don't hold your breath.