

CANNIBALS



By Rory Mullarkey.

Directed by Michael Longhurst.

On a farm, in a village, on the fringe of Europe, life is simple but hard. When the sweeping forces of war and progress pass through, Lizaveta must run for her life. Finding shelter on an old woman's farm, she tries to piece her life back together. But her past catches up with her and she must keep moving.

This bold and unique play is by Manchester playwright, Rory Mullarkey. It is his first full-length play, written while he was Pearson Playwright in Residence at the Royal Exchange in 2011.

THE VIEW FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

Assistant director Ed Lewis gives us an insight into the CANNIBALS rehearsal process and explores the unique possibilities which working on new writing presents.

New writing before the 1950s was epitomised by writers such as Terrance Rattigan and Noel Coward; these were plays about and for the middle/upper classes. Plays which stereotypically showed a wealthy man either comically or tragically getting into difficult situations with his family or a lover, all set to the back drop of plush houses or hotels with lashings of caviar and champagne (I may be over exaggerating slightly). This status quo was then torn apart by John Osborne's seminal play *Look Back In Anger* which showed that the working class did have a voice in theatre and that there was scope for gritty, down-to-earth drama about real people. It was a huge success and it released the floodgates, totally redefining what new writing for theatre was.

However, some may now argue that a lot of new writing, or at least the stereotype for new writing, is a clichéd version of *Look Back in Anger*. When you say new writing many people still think of a play set in a run-down flat somewhere "urban" with characters tearing each other apart and a lot of swearing thrown in to make it "gritty and real". I am, of course, generalising again and I personally believe the landscape of new writing is not as bleak as this, nevertheless I do believe it is not as exciting or innovative as it could be. Therefore, whenever I encounter a piece that challenges this stereotype and does something innovative with the way the story is told whilst still holding a human story at its heart I get quite excited! *Cannibals* by Manchester playwright Rory Mullarkey does just this.



Ony Uhiara as Lizaveta and Simon Armstrong as A Soldier
(Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

It is a big play that tells its story in a unique way; there are thirty-four scenes and there are some scenes that are only two lines of stage directions. Despite the large number of scenes, the language is sparse, but what language is there is filled with character and drama. You would not be wrong for thinking that this play sounds a lot more like a screenplay rather than a piece of theatre. Yet, it is inherently theatrical in its style; the ideas that are going on in the play are larger and more poetic than cinema could create. Having it in the theatre also means that it quite literally becomes a visceral and tangible experience, furthering the story as the play centres on how various people try to possess or 'cannibalise' the main character, Lizaveta.

When I say it is a big play, I mean that its settings, themes and ideas are epic in scale. A lot of new writing is done in studio spaces, firstly due to financial risk (a play by a new writer will rarely sell as well as a Shakespeare for example) but also due to the fact a lot of newly written plays have ideas, themes and settings that require smaller and more intimate spaces. However, *Cannibals* is set across an ex-Soviet war-torn country and Manchester and poses big questions about our society and consumerism in the West. A play with

such an expansive setting and themes would not work in a studio space it requires a bigger space that can give its ideas room to be shared. Hence why it has been programmed into the main space at the Exchange: such a big space not only gives the play the stage it deserves but it also gives more creative scope for the artistic collaborators involved in taking the play from page to stage.

This is something which all playwrights will take into consideration, the work that is being made does not stop at the text, the process of bringing the text to life is part of making theatre and leaving scope for your collaborators is vital. Directors, designers and actors interpretations of the text -however large or small- are vital in making the play come to life. Many new writers to theatre may be wary of this but if the play is robust enough and your collaborators are loyal to text then the writer's ideas will always shine through. Moreover, if they have been through another creative mind then they will only come out even sharper and more focused than they were before.

In rehearsals we have been tackling Rory's poetic language and stage directions through movement. The opening scene of the play is almost a poem in



Ony Uhiara as Lizaveta and Ricky Champ as Josef The Fool
(Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

itself but it also has a lot of action with the main character, Lizaveta, skinning a sheep, cutting carrots, milking a cow, washing her face, going to bed and waking up in a field, all of which occurs over the opening three minutes. It would be possible for us to recreate all of those actions on stage in some form of literal gesture (some would be easier than others!) however, the opening scene is not really about what Lizaveta is doing but about how the particular way she does these actions affects her husband. Furthermore, it is about showing the atmosphere of the world that they live in together; therefore, we have tried to create that world in a more poetic way. The actors are using simple but stylised movement so that we can heighten the world and thus push the text into a more abstract level for the audience, setting up a poetic language that we can return to throughout the play. So rather than spoon feeding the audience and dictating what the visual world of the play is, we have created a landscape and a theatrical language that imaginatively engages them into creating their own unique picture of the world Rory has written.

Many rehearsal processes begin with research into the world of the play. For example, when we were doing *To Kill a Mockingbird* we did quite a lot of research into segregation that was in place in Alabama in 1935. However, the world Rory has created is a fictional, poetic and imaginative landscape that is inspired by ex-Soviet countries that he lived in a few years ago. We could have done a lot of research into countries like Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan but as there are no direct links to the world of the play this may have taken up more time than would have been useful. Therefore, having the Rory in the room has been incredibly

useful, not only could he give us his first-hand experiences but he also told us about experiences and people that directly inspired the world and characters of the play. This, has meant that rather than wasting rehearsal time on guessing the writers intentions or what inspired the play we have been able to ask directly, get an answer and spend more time working out the intricacies of the acting rather than a lot of 'table work'.

We have also been lucky that Michael (the director) is sensitive towards Rory's work but at the same time Rory is also sensitive to his and the actors work too. The culture we have for theatre in Britain is that the writer is the primary creative force as everything always comes back to the text. However, this can at times breed a culture of dictatorship from the writer that can be artistically stifling for other creatives involved. This is not necessarily a bad thing: it does work in some cases, the works of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are perhaps the best two examples of this. Nevertheless, it has been great to have a writer in a rehearsal room that is so open to his work being interpreted and creatively furthered by his collaborators. Whenever we have discussed the work in rehearsals Rory always starts his answers with, "maybe this is an option..." or "it could be this..." and he always ends with "its up to you." Having this approach has meant that the actors have been able to make brave choices and hopefully, we have made a better piece because of it.

CANNIBALS runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 3 - 27 April 2013.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833
royalexchange.co.uk/cannibals

Introducing CANNIBALS
Wednesday 17 April 10am – 12pm
Pre-show workshop for schools, groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.
£8 / £6 (all concessions & group leaders);
Book on 0161 833 9833

In The Lounge
Thursday 18 April, 6 – 7pm
Join assistant director Ed Lewis, as he talks about the world premiere of CANNIBALS, written by local playwright Rory Mullarkey right here within the Royal Exchange walls.
FREE; no need to book

✂️
WHY NOT? Think of an idea for a character you might have in your own play.

Now answer these questions:

- If this character was an animal, what animal would they be?
- If this character was going to be an animal, what animal would they wish to be?
- If this character was an animal, what animal do the other characters in the play think s/he would be?

Now, instead of 'animal', answer the same 3 questions for each of these categories:

- Weather
- A meal
- An item of furniture.