

Animal farm was  
performed at the  
lowry end essay  
sample



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BUSTER**

As the production opens, a group of political refugees begin to tell the story. But they gradually convert themselves into an amazing range of characters, so vividly portrayed that you believe yourself to be actually in the novel.

The inspired acting company uses their bodies and heavy boots to create the animals in this acutely physical production. Animal Farm was performed at the Lowry end on, a direct suggestion that we were about to be told a story. This stage form also brought up the metatheatrical question of who would be watching whom.

The audience was made up of school groups, a particularly hard audience to “hook”. This would prove whether or not the company could hold an audience of this age (14-18 year olds mainly). Their reception was, as expected from the age group, very vocal and active, and despite the occasional time when things just flew over their heads they were held entranced. The tall, bomb shelter style set was already shown as we walked into the auditorium, inspiring hostile images of caged animals, and an industrial poverty.

The play was based on George Orwell’s highly successful and hard-hitting “fairytale”; Animal Farm. This satirical assertion of the horrors and repression of the Russian Revolution has unnervingly coincidental links to modern day societal conflicts as well as revolutionary occurrences and fascist dictators’ rise and fall all through the ages. The story hits you with its direct connection to the current situation in Iraq, as well as Saddam Hussein and Hitler’s cruel dictatorships.

The play tries to make us aware of the disturbing cycle of dictatorship, revolution, new dictator etc. Orwell uses the irony of acting out the events with animals to add a grotesquely misshapen symmetry, a subtle suggestion that for all our civilisation were aren't really that far from our ancestors, the animals. These animals started their lives on stage as victims of circumstance, refugees of civil unrest, war and political retribution. Victims not of broken homes, but of broken trust.

This statement was bitterly indicative of the fact that people all over the world have no place for a home, to place they can call theirs. The mud flooring of the stage used the Brechtian gestic technique to reduce the status of the actors to that of animals, stripping them of identity as they all became covered in dirt and filth together. This could be interpreted as a racist statement, that brown is animal, but I did not read it as thus. I saw this simple and ongoing gesture as a strong statement highlighting the lack of equality and unity in the world.

Here from the start see all the characters, tall and short, male and female as equal, and despite the dirt, somehow pure. Taking familiar objects such as the piano and the bath and placing them in completely unrelated surroundings (the barn) both give the play a strange air of unreality, which helps to build on the non-naturalistic impression of the costumes, and also drags the audience inside the story through further gestic expressionism, the human object used by the animals making the animals into humans.

The tall, corrugated metal walls both created an industrial farm like image, but also a prison or a cage. The height of these walls created an oppressive

air, as if the characters are nothing in the scheme of life. The open and obvious entrance/exit points seemed to say that there was nothing stopping the enslaved animals from running away, so raising the question; why don't they? The movable "pallets" were instrumental in showing how the whole of the animal's lives were bared for all to see, that their lives are simple and plain.

The use of material possessions to build the windmill, which consequently fell is a ironic word on communism, the idea that throwing all your possessions into a group effort will leave you with nothing but disaster, that any assumed chances of freedom through communism will be ripped down around you, despite your most heartfelt effort. Brechtian gestic technique was again used to great effect in dragging the reality of the tale kicking and screaming into the audience's conscience.

By placing an umbrella with and obvious brand name (Donnay) an icon recognisable to our culture, a symbol directly linked to our society's intrinsic materialism. This tells us that this story is not just a fairy tale about talking animals, but about us, and our society, and the way in which we are ruled by fashion, politics and the media: posing yet another deep sociological question, namely that of what rules what; materials, man or politics?

The use of the communal bath's water seemed coincided with moments of intense emotional passion, and made the emotions seem somehow more basic, more pure. Audience was not aloud an easy ride as in some performances. Here the cast draws you in, holding you with strong emotions, so that when you least expect it to happen, boxer is killed with the fierce

crack of a shotgun, tearing. This shocking sound effect created an unsettling realism to the whole play, just as the thunder and lightening added to the dramatic tension of scenes, conjuring up dark premonitions.

The use of torches on stage in the actors' hands tells us that the animals are somehow creating the storm and hence the fear, but also creating a frenzied fear induced panic that the harsh sound effects add to, building the tension to unbearable levels, broken finally with one killing blow, as the towering windmill falls, killing the animals dreams once and for all. The use of multicultural ethnically varied music represented the struggles we see in our minds, the factions and hatreds between countries and religions.

This is yet another reminder that the tale is relevant, not only too Orwell's impression of Russia, but too our entire world. Dehumanisation was exquisitely captured through the removal of clothes to simple undergarments, turning the refugee humans into animals, at the same time creating a disturbing image of vulnerability, of slaves being derided by Jones, and consequently the tyrant pig-man Napoleon. By hiding the opposable thumbs (a human evolutionary development) with heavy boots the actors become further dehumanised, as well as creating an impression of honest, hardy workers.

Note that as Napoleon gets more and more human, and so further falling into evil ways, he wears more and more clothes. So we see humans as being evil, and clothes as evil, an extension of the story of Adam and Eve perhaps? The simplicity of Orwell's approach to the story was not lost with this telling causing those who hear and see the message to be even more shocked

when they are shown the recognisable elements, when they are told that the play is about them. Napoleons key speech catches our hearts, and hatreds, as a pastiche of Hitler's addresses to the Nazi party.

The semiotics of his props, stature and proxemically strong centre stage position all read as a tyrannical dictator, sure of the effectiveness of his words. To strengthen the Hitler image the animals behind conduct a march and salute ironically similar to the "Nazi goosestep", with rigid arm movements and straight backs, like puppets held firmly in reign. The unison of the movements show them as all being equal, but Napoleon being exempt from the need to march is proved as much stronger, and much more important than the rest.

This was a performance not to be missed, its epic proportions, echoed by the huge staging and the towering windmill constructed before your very eyes. A bitter reflection on our human "civilised" ways, emotional charged, with moments of utter and complete suspension of disbelief. The whole feat was a thoroughly enjoyable experience - whether a drama student or an Orwell virgin, a teacher or a high school drop-out the sheer perfection of symbolic representation, and a polished performance from this talented northern cast - you'd be barking mad to miss it!