National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society	:	The Community of Hungerford Theatrical Company
Production	:	Air Swimming
Written By	:	Charlotte Jones
Date	:	10/10/26
Venue	:	Hungerford Hub
District	:	13
Reviewer	:	Cate Naylor

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Thank you for inviting me to your production of “Airswimming” which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was performed in an intimate setting at Hungerford library, and I was one of only 13 in the audience. A shame that there weren’t a few more, as it was such an excellent production. I was pleased to be able to catch up with Hoffi and Roushka at the end to chat about the play, especially as this is my last time visiting as the NODA 13 Representative.

Having never seen the play before, I did a little googling and discovered that the idiomatic meaning of “air swimming” or "keeping your head above water" is a figurative expression meaning to cope with stress, or stay on top of a situation without drowning in problems. In this play, it refers to two women trying to keep sane after being wrongly incarcerated in a mental asylum. Airswimming was written in 1997 by Charlotte Jones and delivers a lesson in social history where society and men in authority often placed women into mental institutions without what today would seem plausible reasons. It is a two-hander based on the true story of Dora Kitson and Persephone Baker who were wrongly incarcerated in a hospital for the criminally insane. Dora is a cigar smoking ‘transvestite’ incarcerated for dressing and living like a man and Persephone for having an illegitimate baby.

The story starts in the 1920’s when the two women were first incarcerated and travels through fifty years flipping backwards and forwards until they are released in 1972. In this production, the flipping between times was seamlessly managed, using different costume pieces, props and lighting effects. Initially, the time switches seemed important, but as the play progressed, they became less important and the relationship between the two women became the focus. What really struck me was the chemistry in the relationship between them, the intensity, the tenderness and the love, as these two very different personalities gradually became intertwined. At first **Hoffi** playing Dora (Dorph) was the

more dominant personality, living her life with military precision and comforting the more vulnerable and childlike Persephone (Porph) played by **Roushka**. But, as the years passed, the roles began to reverse with Persephone becoming the comforter of an increasingly angry and desperate Dora.

Cast

Hoffi Robinson (Dora/ Dorph)

Hoffi gave a well-balanced portrayal of young Dora, using military behaviours to appear absolutely in control of the situation she found herself in. Often quoting and celebrating the achievements of female heroes in military history gave an obsessive element to the role, which annoyed Persephone hugely. As her character aged, Hoffi gave a very powerful interpretation of a women who was becoming increasingly angry with her unjust incarceration. It is easy to over-egg the anger in this situation, but Hoffi gave a very measured progression which culminated in a raw but beautifully handled suicide attempt. Dora does though have some lighter comedy moments particularly when miming different uses of a battery operated Moulinex hand whisk and when she took on the role of a quizmaster to ask Persepone questions about Doris Day.

Roushka Westall (Persephone/ Porph)

Roushka gave a child-like interpretation of the young Persephone which beautifully captured the innocent naivety of the character who reminisced about her days as a debutante and didn't fully understand why she was there in the asylum. Her pitiful assertion that she was 'Only here for a week' and her family 'will come for me' were heart wrenching, as was her description of having her baby taken away. As the older Persephone, she became increasingly obsessed with Doris Day, donning a blonde wig and breaking into song at regular intervals. Roushka has a lovely sweet and captivating singing voice, and she delivered the snippets of Doris Day songs beautifully in character.

Together Hoffi and Roushka were excellent and their natural chemistry and versatility made their performances very special and totally believable. The play, which handled difficult and to our eyes outrageous content was raw and powerful but totally engaging. Both actors perfectly delivered their very different personas, seamlessly transitioning back and forth between the years and developing their characters as they went.

Creatives

Hoffi Robinson (Director) with **Samuel Robinson** (Dramaturg) & **April Richards-Smith** (Prompt)

The power of this play is totally based on the two women whose lives have been ruined by their unjust incarceration, but over the years and through a developing friendship have acquired a depth and strength of character to help them deal with the injustices. Hoffi in her direction and in the relationship, she had with fellow actor Roushka captured the tragedy of the situation, and the loss of reality of the two women. Having the same actors portraying both their older and younger selves was intensely powerful and the switch between the two had been imaginatively developed and aided the continuity on the play.

The minimalist set was effective, and a black cloth hung at the back over the books gave a clear backdrop and the prop box worked well to allow quick transitions. Their costumes of khaki boiler suits worked well for the 50-year time span. The use of 20 or so buckets whilst slightly surreal, was brilliantly devised and I particularly liked their use as a device to show the passing of time. The only thing that bothered me a little was the use of jay cloths to clean as they were not invented until 1963. Using cotton cloths would have been more authentic.

This is the first time I have seen a play in a library and although I initially thought that the shelves of books might be distracting, due to the intensity of the performances, I quickly forgot that I was indeed in a library.

This play which due to the subject matter could have been uncomfortable viewing as it dealt with the unfair incarceration of women for the feeblest reasons was instead poignant, at times tender and often funny and demonstrating the resilience of spirit in adversity.

Having dramaturg **Samuel** in the team paid off and the subject matter was handled authentically, and the two actors clearly understood the time periods and their situations.

I have to say that I was not aware of **April** the prompt and I didn't hear any prompts, but often, just knowing that there is someone there with a script is reassuring, especially for a two-hander when the actors are on stage the whole time and have so many lines to learn.

Sasha Lovell (Choreographer)

One theme in the play and indeed its title was "airswimming" and Sasha had choreographed a mimed, synchronized swimming routine which was very effective. For this choreography, Dorph and Porph donned swimming caps, goggles and nose clips before proceeding to flap their arms through the air

and move their legs in synchronised swimming patterns which they did to cope with their boredom and confinement. The choreography was beautifully designed and added an element of humour.

Hugh Legh (Lighting)

The lighting which consisted of two sets of led lights mounted on tall scaffold poles either side of the acting area was simple but very effectively used. Different areas were lit and different amounts of light were used to depict the passing of time and the changes in mood of the play.

Cameron Westall (Sound)

The sound design captured the mood of the play with well-timed clips of Doris Day songs such as 'Fly Me to the Moon', 'Move Over, Darling' and 'Que Sera Sera'. For one so young; Cameron is only 14, he handled the sound extremely well and was bang on time with each clip.

Final Thoughts

Overall, this was an engrossing production which highlighted the true story of the inhumane treatment and wrongful imprisonment of women in mental asylums in the early 20th century. It was thought provoking, raw and sad, and yet it was also funny at times. In their performances, Hoffi and Roushka very clearly demonstrated the mental strength that Dora and Persephone needed to survive their incarceration. Thank you for inviting me to what was a moving production.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative