

'And in the End...'

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Published version

ABULHAWA, Danielle (2020). 'And in the End...'. In: PINCHBECK, Michael and DUGGAN, Patrick, (eds.) Acts of Dramaturgy: The Shakespeare Trilogy. Intellect.

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And in *The End*...

In *The End* there are two performers, Michael Pinchbeck and Ollie Smith and as we are told during the opening lines, for the former this is the end of his career, for the latter it is the beginning. The text keeps circling back and forth between these two positions.

It's a play about a play about a play that's extremely simple and complex at the same time. It dissects itself. One minute you're thinking about how the process of making is being so openly foregrounded in the work and in the next, Pinchbeck and Smith bring up this very feature (as if they read your mind). It's a moment (of many in the piece) that's tainted with self-deprecation, in which Pinchbeck explains that they didn't want this to be a play about a play about a play about a play about a play... simultaneously remarking on a style of contemporary theatre making that's perhaps a little cliched, but which they're also couched within; to dissect from the inside, perhaps to take the piss a little, to unfold.

The programme notes detail that Mole Wetherell (Artistic Director of Reckless Sleepers) and Hetain Patel (Artist / Choreographer) were dramaturgs for the piece. Having seen Hetain Patel's piece, *Ten* (2010), at the Greenroom in 2011 I recognise the cyclical movement on stage between Smith and Pinchbeck as being genetically related; the back and forth from left to right, and the repeated pursuing (of the man, by the bear) in a circle on the stage; the cyclical structure of the piece, which is defined by the performers' shift in status from bear to man and man to bear. I like the idea that Patel as dramaturg finds a way into the work like an asterisk.

A punctuation metaphor seems like an appropriate way to meet the work, since it's a piece that so cleverly pivots around words and meanings. Pinchbeck remarks that he hopes the work might be a 'dot, dot, dot' rather than a full stop...

Then there's the bear and the idea, as Pinchbeck explains in the piece, that the final stage direction in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1623), 'exit, pursued by a bear', might be a reference to the popular entertainment of bear baiting during the Elizabethan era. Pinchbeck reads this as Shakespeare writing the bear an opportunity for revenge. Theatre and performance have the power to write things in, and also to delete things out.

The performers' texts, written on cue cards, as if for making a speech, are littered around the stage as they are read and used up by the performers. Throughout the show this littering is described as a building up of the set - 'it's part of the aesthetic!' the performers proclaim, as if responding to an unspoken distaste (perhaps from an imagined audience member) at the detritus, at the lack of something more than words and paper.

The first time I saw the piece, I was left wondering whether this really was the end of Michael's career. Many of my students asked to which I replied I didn't know. I loved the ambiguity, the not-knowing what is real. *The End* is thick with ideas and transportative text; it's the sort of theatre you can really chew over (like a bear, perhaps). Carefully, cleverly structured, thoughtful and intelligent.

And in the end, there was a strange synchronicity and a dramatic irony in the fact that this performance was programmed by the Green Room in Manchester long before funding cuts were announced by Arts Council England, which resulted in the venue losing their funding and having to close. So, *The End* became Green Room's penultimate show, their 'almost last', which to me at least, feels like the ideal space.