

## Moonfleece Review by Michael Rahman

It is probably fair to say that it has been some time since we gave our Youth Theatre something gritty to really get their teeth into. We're accustomed to see this talented young cast bring smiles to our faces in family friendly fare, but if the pandemic taught us anything it was that losing a two year chunk of time means a lot to these youngsters. They were in danger of missing out on the kind of challenge that past shows like Chatroom, Punk Rock and DNA would have afforded them. It was a relief to be able to give them Moonfleece after a long delay, but would they be up to the challenge? What burst onto our stage in September 2022 was a complex, dark tale told to us by bunch of kids who were well equipped to tell it.

And burst onto the stage they did! What an explosive opening! The stage is bathed in an ethereal light, bringing afternoon warmth to a scene of urban decay. Perhaps in our minds we still cling to the idea of our Chipstead audience wearing pearls. And they would be clutching those pearls surveying a stage strewn with discarded take away packages and graffiti on the walls. Then the door is kicked down and we are braced for a night of exciting theatre.



Sam Norris was born to play Tommy, towering over Tash Chant's Link who was defiant in the face of his menace. However, compared to Louis Higham's Gavin, Tommy was centred and controlled. Gavin was a loose cannon with his suit sleeves rolled up reminding those of a certain age of Gripper Stebson from Grange Hill. Rosie Hannon's costumes were spot on, all these suits providing a veneer of respectability, trying to disguise their true nature.

Reading Moonfleece many years ago the challenge I saw was portraying the diversity that the play demanded. Not having seen Tash before I wondered where we had found an Eastern European actress to play Link! She kept up the accent throughout like a star. A real firecracker.



Just when we think the play is in danger of pitting Link's lone voice against a bullying onslaught, on come the contrasting voices of Alex Hilder's Alex, Asher Byrne's Jez and to some extent Lola Rush-Miller's Sarah, who seemed less concerned with Curtis's politics than with his recent behaviour. It was great to see Oliver Horle as Curtis go on an emotional journey through the play, his tough exterior breaking away in the face of family betrayal, revealing the raw emotion beneath. Comic relief came from Beth Brooks as Nina, who brought balance and nonchalance. Alex Hilder portrayed her character's strength well, and really embraced a part which was such a contrast from her role in *Goodnight, Mister Tom* just a few short months before.



The scene with the onstage violence was handled skilfully, where Asher's reactions were realistic and he delivered his lines during that difficult scene very well. There isn't a 'fight coach' listed in the programme so Emily and Jane Foster certainly had a lot to consider and the cast handled it brilliantly.

As the afternoon drew on into the evening the quality of the light from the setting sun changed imperceptibly thanks to James Willis's lighting design. The sound quality made us believe we were in that flat, hearing how Gavin was upsetting the dogs who were pitched at just the right level thanks to Ian Grayson's sound design.

Towards the end of the play we see Zak played by Charlie McCarthy, the wearer of the 'Moonfleece' which was a great bit of kit made by Verity Ridout. The character is reticent to begin with but then must deliver all the blows, so we were glad to be in Charlie's capable hands. At the end of the play we see Wayne and Stacey, storming in, oblivious of the atmosphere, feet firmly in mouths. The audience knows something they don't and, while small, the parts are so important and Bradley Adams and Olivia Thynne (of *Anne of Green Gables* fame) were completely fantastic. Olivia is Meryl Streepian in her accents. But perhaps some of the kudos should go to Lucy Betts the accent coach.

The whole cast did a really brilliant job and we are all so glad that we got our tickets and caught this excellent play.

