

The Scotsman, 22 February 1999

Amid all the rage and controversy that accompanied the award of the Scottish Arts Council's first batch of long-term Scottish theatre touring franchises, there was one decision that was welcomed almost everywhere in Scottish theatre; for as well as awarding four major touring concessions, SAC also gave £70,000 a year, for a guaranteed four years to Graham Eatough and David Greig's Suspect Culture, purveyors since 1990 of a brand of cool, stylish Scottish international modernism – beautifully finished yet somehow full of emotion – that younger Scottish audiences can't get enough of.

Now that four year funding has produced its first fruit in Suspect Culture's latest production Mainstream, co-produced with the Bush Theatre in London and premiered in Stirling on Friday; and although in style the show is very much a slimmed-down, smaller-scale reflection of the company's 1997 Edinburgh Festival hit Timeless, it seems to me if anything a stronger piece of work, beautifully performed, fascinatingly structured, more tightly focused on a richer theme, and sometimes breathtaking in the depths of meaning it reaches with terrific economy of gesture and language.

Essentially Mainstream is a deconstructed Brief encounter for the late nineties, the story of two people who meet on a management course in a Scottish seaside hotel – one a Glasgow based employee of a record company, the other an 'outside' personnel consultant – and suddenly fall, not quite into an affair, but into a moment of absolute intimacy that shocks both of them. But where the lovers of Brief Encounter are divided by duty and convention, these two are separated by the much more insidious loneliness of the late 20th century, the emphasis on individuality and personal 'career development' that often masks both a frightening isolation – the sense that the 'mainstream' is always somewhere else – and a deep sameness of life.

On Ian Scott's beautiful, minimal hi-tech set – small table, fragment of high cocktail bar, chair, stack of plates, all in gleaming steel on a raised platform lit from below in pools of golden light – Greig's text and Eatough's production capture this sense of fragmentation first by dividing the encounter into five basic scenes, which can be revisited again and again with infinite small shifts in the dialogue; and then by spreading the two roles among four actors, two male and two female, in a way that strips rococo detail of 'character', while somehow emphasising both the uniqueness of the quality each person brings to the story, and their common humanity. The work of the four actors – Callum Cuthbertson, Kate Dickie, Paul Thomas Hickey and Louise Ludgate – is magnificent in its subtlety of detail, and its sense of discipline combined with deep emotion and real humour. It is supported every step of the way by Nick Powell's powerful, melancholy score for cello and violin; and the show leaves behind it an almost overwhelming, but somehow enriching sense of the sadness of a thirty-something generation for whom personality and life-history has become just another 'asset' to be packaged for interview, and for whom real emotional intimacy with another human-being has become the most subversive act of all.

Joyce Macmillan

The Times, 24 February 1999

Two people, a record company A & R man and a personnel manager meet in a shabby hotel miles from nowhere. After initial hostilities, and fuelled by drink, they spend the night together, parting as strangers. In a parallel universe the same thing happens. Exactly the same circumstances, exactly the same result. But these two people react both to circumstances and each other differently, and what happens in between the beginning and the end of their almost identical encounters takes a different turn. Meanwhile, in another parallel universe ...

And so the merry-go-round goes on in Suspect Culture's latest dissection of relationships among what used to be called Generation X, the late twentysomethings and thirtysomethings for whom nothing is ever easy. Taking its cue from their last major work, the brilliant *Timeless*, which looked at the secrets and lies between four friends, *Mainstream*, at the MacRobert Arts Centre, peels back the layers of personal artifice even more to eavesdrop on late-night secrets and morning-after awkwardness we can all recognise. A simple enough exercise, but Suspect Culture like to make life difficult for themselves, and the dizzying permutations that result from having four actors play two characters leaves no avenue of intimacy unexplored.

Developed over a lengthy devising process, this is a typically immaculate piece of work from the most adventurous, most in-tune-with-the-times theatre company in Britain. As David Greig's crisp script jump-cuts between first meeting into final parting, the effect is akin to *Sliding Doors* as penned by Harold Pinter. The four strong acting ensemble of Callum Cuthbertson, Kate Dickie, Paul Thomas Hickey and Louise Ludgate are kept on their toes as they switch between time zones as well as characters, while other liaisons are glimpsed in a second playing area.

But it is the director Graham Eatough who appears to have left his signature all over *Mainstream*. All the stylistic tics from *Timeless* are here, including the heightened use of gesture and Nick Powell's gorgeously evocative soundscape, but they are used to even more personal effect as *Mainstream* explores the secret lives that go on behind the mask of profession. Where the repetition of the piece could grate, it hypnotises and seduces you deep into the heart of this Brief Encounter for the end of the century. Something very similar is probably going on in a hotel room near you right now.

Neil Cooper

The Guardian, 12 August 1999

We are all performers. We all put on a show. And we are all alone. The more information we have about each other in the global age, the less we seem to connect.

Suspect Culture's latest show plays a clever game with theatre and convention. With the act of acting and the games we all play, with each other and ourselves.

Four performers play two people, an A & R scout for a record company and a personnel officer, who are marooned in a room in remote hotel by the sea. There they reveal things and they hide them. David Greig's brilliant text plays as if it were on a continuous loop like memory itself. We hear the same stories but with a different spin, from a different mouth, or sometimes the same one, only differently. The more we hear, the less we really know. The more they tell, the less they reveal.

This is a hard, cruel, beautiful show, almost mathematical in its precision. The coolness of the performance style is in perfect harmony with the piece's icy images: two almost-strangers in a hotel room, one watching the other, naked, making him or herself come; the faint sounds of life being emitted from a body buried for two days in a car deep within a snow drift. Like a radio transmitter in space.

Lyn Gardner