

'Self Help' / 'Respect' by Anita Gallo ***

Making its week-long debut at one of Edinburgh's delightful hidden venues, award-winning Scottish writer Anita Gallo's bipolar double-bill 'Self-Help'/'Respect' could not be a more contrary. The only tangible bond is the versatile presence of actor Paul Comrie in both, and his impressive transition from affable gay cafe owner in the former to disturbed captor in the latter is a testament to the quality of the cast, which boasts both experienced stage alumni and up-and-coming talent.

Andy Corelli directs the performances with a minimum of decoration and fuss, and at no point do these feel like scripts yearning for a screen adaptation. The lighter 'Self-Help' in particular fully embraces the stage medium with its occasional fourth-wall breaking and tactfully clumsy scene transitions, while the darker 'Respect' is boldly presented as a single, continuous scene, omitting none of the awkward silences and realistic conversational meanderings that enhance the genuinely tense atmosphere as the performance leads to its ambiguous conclusion. This straightforward attitude avoids unnecessary complications and the need for too great a suspension of disbelief, as each actor portrays a single, easily identifiable character.

Taken individually, for there is no inclusive way of viewing these two disparate shows, 'Self-Help' is traditional rom-com fare with a metafictional twist for seasoned theatregoers. Its narrative of a middle-aged single woman eager for lots of sex with lots of men is as inherently clean-cut as a Richard Curtis standard, and evidently aims to expose unspoken universal truths, apparently inspired by the playwright's experiences living in London. Although morally dubious, the events never cross into sinister territory, unlike its singularly dark companion piece, and the prevailing tone is one of fast-paced whimsical enjoyment, packing a great deal into less than an hour.

'Respect' is opposite in almost all respects, striving to be an emotional tour-de-force between two talented actors inhabiting disturbed, disturbing characters. The action is as well-paced as realism permits, and the tension escalates effectively before the dam inevitably bursts. The explosive peaks and dramatic twists occasionally feel like they're trying too hard, but the personal touch ensures that the audience leaves feeling genuinely unsettled, and most likely dwelling on the less-than-subtle warning regarding the inherent danger of one-night stands and allowing a stranger into your life and private abode.

Dave Warburton; Remote Goat