

Still / Signs of Life 09 by Cormac Quinn

Cormac Quinn's double bill involves the same two actors, both pieces are very short and serious and cover several of the same themes, particularly that of isolation. They differ though, quite drastically; one of them is rather tedious while the other I found really quite original and engrossing.

Quinn is certainly a playwright who isn't afraid to experiment: both pieces have unconventional settings, neither are close to our spacetime, if they are in our spacetime at all (spacetime? - Newtonian physics was laid to rest a century ago. I think it's time we started adopting more modern terminology).

Still's setting, though, could be described as conventional, from a theatrical perspective. Post-Beckett and -Sartre an abstract setting, purgatory, hell or post-apocalypse, is no longer that mind-blowing an idea and often looks like a way to save on set, on the designer's part and no need for specific research on the part of the writer and director.

It certainly felt like purgatory for me, back at some infernal Fringe witnessing yet another Sartre's *No Exit* wannabe, not that I was ever bowled away by Sartre's original. Repetition was used to excess, and not in a funny Stewart Lee way, but in a dull pointless "Lets see how many times we can say the word 'still'" way.

Signs of Life did have a setting, indeed even some set and rather well made costumes. Joy! On a spacecraft heading to a distant planet on the trail of a signal that appears to be from another sentient being, we encounter two astronauts.

Science fiction does occasionally venture onto the stage, but it is rare as other media tend to suit it better. Sci-fi on stage also tends towards comedy, whether intentionally or otherwise. What was unusual about this piece is that it managed to do sci-fi successfully on stage and avoid all but the merest giggle from the audience.

The temptation to spoof *Star Trek* was completely resisted and instead the piece achieved a level of cosmic eeriness, of the sort found in some of Russell T Davies' recent *Doctor Who* episodes and in the ultimate space exploration film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which is quite clearly referenced in the plot of *Signs*.

Where Kubrick eschewed dialogue for the visual, Quinn as a playwright has to use words and *Signs* is a well constructed mix of conversation but also some good monologues, especially from Cameron Mowat the more serious of the two actors.

Chris Lynch, the other actor, tended towards cheekier and slightly more deranged characters. Both actors performed well in *Signs of Life*. In *Still* however they were rather hampered by the vague dialogue and the fact for most of the play they never talked directly to each other.

Still did have its moment, at the very end there is an avalanche of information, emotion and revelation, so it is better than some 'vague plays' where everything is left unanswered. However it would have worked better if the facts had been more gradually revealed. I also felt it rather missed the shock it was looking for at the end.

These were experimental and I think if Quinn were to expand on his second experiment, *Signs of Life*, he might well be able to create some explosive theatre.

Seth Ewin; British Theatre Guide