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Bouncers – Arena Theatre - Regent Centre, Christchurch.

THEATRE-goers on a cold night in the 21st century very quickly became night clubbers of the 1980s, as they absorbed the disco scene on stage, complete with flashing lights and pulsating music. A quartet of mildly menacing, broad shouldered men in evening suits wearing bow ties and brooding expressions watched every arrival, making sure there was no trouble. And that was before the show started.

The four men were the bouncers of the title, overseeing the action in this John Godber play, written as a piece of theatre in which the audience becomes part of the humour, violence and pathos of the characters involved.

Early in the evening one of the bouncers observed: "All human life is here before us." And so it was. We met Northern girls getting ready for a big night out, chattering about hairdos and high heels. Then Hooray Henrys drinking heavily on a rugby tour and laughing hysterically at trouser-dropping antics. More lads, this time on a stag night and trying drunkenly to get into the night club without tickets. The lasses, giggly and tipsy, clinging to their partners but still eyeing up the other male talent. Finally a disorderly queue for taxis and the decision whether or not to buy kebabs. Through it all, the bouncers interacting, watching and mulling over their lives as the nightclub music throbbed away into the small hours.

The action moves seamlessly and swiftly as the four principal men, on a minimalist set and with no changes of costume, played the majority of characters.

Russell Biles totally convinced as Lucky Eric and was outstanding. So too was Scott Sullivan playing Les while Simon Meredith (Ralph) and Pete Griffiths as Judd also excelled. Even as women they were believable, such was the calibre of the acting but it was in the roles of bouncers the characterisations became larger than life. Vulgar - comparing notes in the urinals and acting out a scene from a blue movie - and violent, with fights breaking out in the club and between themselves. Yet showing sensitivity, especially when Eric revealed, in moving monologues, the deep thoughts which went on inside his bullet head.

Completing the talented cast, Adam Donoghue impressed in a potpourri of parts from DJ to kebab seller.

Paul Nelson made a fine directorial debut for the company by deftly handling the balance between the uncouth behaviour of most of the characters and the unexpected depth of feelings of others. The result was a roller-coaster of emotions in a powerful piece of theatre which will have touched each person in the audience in some way.

Every credit to all those involved in this production by Arena Theatre for rising to the challenge of Bouncers. The play dealt well with difficult issues, made much of comedy antics, sometimes felt uncomfortable to watch yet was at all times totally compelling.

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