



Loneliness of the long-distance killer

THEATRE

Grounded
 Public Theater, New York
 ★★★★★

Brendan Lemon

Earlier this month, Anne Hathaway made a high-energy appearance on the US television show *Lyp Sync Battle*, mouthing along to Miley Cyrus. The musical tastes of Hathaway's nameless fighter pilot in George Brant's monologue *Grounded*, now playing at the Public Theater's Anspacher space, tend more towards AC/DC, but Hathaway's fierce commitment to performance remains evident. Her work, and that of Julie Taymor, who has staged an ever-morphing, high-tech production, make this 85-minute evening impressive.

The participation of two such high-profile talents was essential for the continued life of Brant's project. The play received US productions in 2012 and an acclaimed UK version in 2013 as well as a New York outing in 2014, at Walker-space. But none of those previous productions were able to draw on the calibre of resources – projections, sound engineering, original music by Oscar-winning composer Elliot Goldenthal – that Taymor does here.

The presence of Hathaway imbues *Grounded* with movie-star glamour, underlining the connection to Hollywood films such as *Top Gun* and *GI Jane*. Brant's story contains less flag-waving than those films, while retaining the former's sense of fighter-pilot swagger and the latter's examination of the challenges women face in the military.

Hathaway's pilot is determined to be accepted as one of the beer-swilling, pool-playing lads, which means that the actor's physical movement is much less

graceful than we are used to from her movies. She spends the evening in a chair glued to her targets, trudging around at home, or racing through the desert landscape in a state of fury.

In *Grounded*, the pilot has her ego deflated when, after becoming pregnant, she is reassigned to the dreaded "Chair Force". She, her husband and baby daughter move to Las Vegas where she becomes a drone operator, spending 12 hours a day striking targets halfway round the world. The blood-free emptiness of the Nevada desert contrasts with the blood-filled horror of the Middle Eastern deserts in which her targets roam.

Clad in a green flight suit, she not only conducts drone warfare but lives a drone-like existence. And as she becomes more and more aware that we are all as subject to surveillance as the distant targets whom she vaporises,



she suffers increasing mental stress. Hathaway is as much a cog in Taymor's video-game production as the pilot is a small player in the US's war on terrorism. The stage may be bare except for an Arabian amount of sand, but the black mirror that stretches across the rear wall provides a spectacular canvas for *Grand Theft Auto*-like projections of Nevada highways and Middle Eastern landscapes. We are a long way from the darling puppets of Taymor's *The Lion King*.

Brant provides scant geopolitical context, and arguably this lack of facts helps to reinforce the soullessness of the pilot's existence, but his writing style is a bit too staccato for my taste – a few developed anecdotes would have helped deepen the story emotionally. But Hathaway's memorably kinetic performance is noteworthy in itself.

publictheater.org

POP

The Fall
 Electric Brixton, London
 ★★★★★

Ludovic Hunter-Tilney

A new generation is rejecting the traditional British mode of letting one's hair down, with surveys reporting falling drug and alcohol use among the young. Perhaps that's why so many of them were at The Fall's gig: they had come to goggle at a battered relic of the olden days.

The Fall's leader Mark E. Smith, 58, has been a mainstay of alternative music since 1970s punk. He is also a veteran of intoxication. His songs are steeped in alcohol, chemicals, tobacco smoke and confusion, while his features are as craggy and unwelcoming as the most ungentrified pub in his native Manchester. He started the gig half an hour late, gurgling a noise through which could be dimly discerned "My Door Is Never", from 2007's *Reformation Post TLC*. What followed was as much a surreal anti-happening as a rock gig. Smith roamed the stage, interfering with instruments and vociferating into two or three microphones simultaneously. The occasional fragment of sense materialised amid the groans and barks like an image in a Rorschach test.

The rest of the band provided the order amid Smith's imp-like misrule. They took a few moments to warm up but then settled into a pounding Can-style groove. "Auto-Pilot 2014-2016", from the excellently named forthcoming album *Sublingual Tablet*, was the standout, a prime slice of old-fashioned experimental rock with a mesmerising beat, wired guitar riffs and psychedelic Korg synthesiser drones over which Smith delivered an opaque diatribe against "English musicians", a pet hate.

Meanwhile the youthful contingent of the audience, a novel addition to the grizzled lags who usually turn up to Fall gigs, moshed merrily at the front as though it were 1976.

The usually contrary Smith seemed energised by the sight, leading his band back for a curfew-busting series of encores. The abstinent habits of modern British youth may be about to go into reverse.

thefall.org

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Janáček's Glagolitic Mass
 Royal Festival Hall, London
 ★★★★★

Hannah Nepil

Certain programmes function not as a cohesive package, but as an excuse to showcase one piece. This Royal Festival Hall concert was a case in point. The members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra looked thrilled to get the first half over with, so that they could move on to their final offering: Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* brought out the best in Czech conductor Tomáš Netopil, who, like the composer, hails from Moravia, and was brought up on Janáček's music.

Not that the other two pieces were a write-off. The Overture to Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* offered verve and gravitas. Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 never wanted for grace or light-footedness. But neither reading had quite the bite nor sense of contrast to make these hard-worked warhorses speak afresh. Particularly in comparison with the Mass, which sounded as good as new. What we heard was not the final draft of the piece, as heard at its 1928 Prague premiere. Instead Netopil used the reconstruction of the original score, recently re-edited by Jiří Zahrádka, in an attempt to capture what he calls "real Janáček".

He succeeded: the result sounds more raw, more capricious, more proudly impractical than the heavily revised final version, particularly when performed, as here, with so much relish. The orchestra struck just the right balance between the earthy and the ethereal. The London Philharmonic Choir, Orfeo Català and Cor de Cambra del Palau de la Música Catalana paid meticulous attention to detail. And the soloists embraced the work's primal spirit, most notably soprano Andrea Danková and organist Catherine Edwards, who fully deserved the audience's roar of approval after her savage solo.

Occasionally the singers went overboard – tenor Kor-Jan Duseljee sounded as if he might crack under the strain of his own ecstasy – but never enough to compromise the impact of this brilliant, life-enhancing, wildly original piece.

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