

STILL LIFE: AN AUDIENCE WITH HENRIETTA MORAES

Monologue-cum-life-drawing-class ●●●

It's pretty disconcerting being addressed by a naked, middle-aged woman, but you soon get used to it. And when she invites you to draw her body, you might feel self-conscious at first – but as writer and actor Sue MacLaine's life drawing-cum-monologue progresses, it all seems to make perfect sense. MacLaine plays Henrietta Moraes, muse to artists including Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, and delivers fractured observations from Moraes' eventful life in a somewhat measured, deliberate performance, interspersed with opportunities to draw her. Paper and pencils are provided.

Quite apart from providing an hour of calm away from the frenzy of the Fringe, in involving the audience in the artistic process MacLaine's show immerses you in the art world, providing an added resonance for her decadent stories of casual sex, casual drugs and their fallout in jail and illness.

It's sometimes too inward looking, and some knowledge of the greats of 20th-century art will help, but as an opportunity to dip a toe into a stimulating world, it's highly successful. (David Kettle)

■ *Whitespace*, 226 0000, until 27 Aug (not 14), 5.15pm, £12 (£9).



WE ARE CHECHENS!

Grozny's pain is not Edinburgh's gain ●●●●●

The demonstration room of the old veterinary school that is now the Summerhall arts centre must be one of the most malodorous and uncomfortable venues on the Fringe. However, there is a certain logic to the young actors of the Łódź Film School presenting their show *We Are Chechens!* in a place which is accustomed to the blood and guts of animal carcasses.

There is no doubting the sincerity of the company's moral outrage at Russia's devastation of Chechnya in the numerous wars which have taken place since 1994. What is in question, however, is the theatrical method – mainly loud screaming, whether in agony or anger, and equally loud singing – with which they express their sympathies.

The piece seems incoherent enough without its confusing combination of poorly spoken, often incomprehensible English and untranslated Polish. Well-intentioned though it is, one can't help but fear that Vladimir Putin has more to fear from Pussy Riot. (Mark Brown)

■ *Summerhall*, 0845 874 3001, until 13 Aug, times vary, £10 (£8).



THE HALF

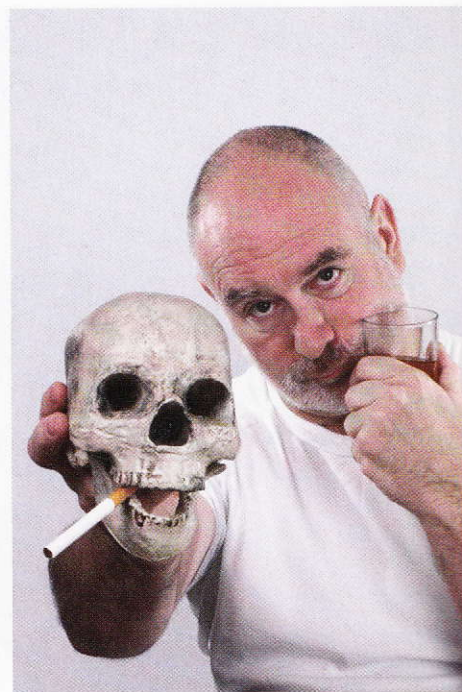
Backstage one-man Hamlet is a cliché-ridden indulgence ●●●●●

In his dressing room, an ageing, embittered thesp – divorced and teetering off the wagon – prepares to play his one-man uncut *Hamlet*. In the half hour before the beginners are called, he unravels and implodes.

Why did it have to be Hamlet? Had Richard Dormer plumped for any other canonical role – Willy Loman, Lear's Fool, Eva sodding Peron – this navel-gazing soliloquy might not have seemed quite such a cliché-ridden indulgence. Instead, he ticks the tropes off one by one. There are gripes about agents, stray whisky bottles and superstition-shattering tics. ('Oh God, I said *Macbeth*. Oh Christ, I said it again.' And again. And again. Look where it comes again.)

Basically, Dormer hasn't written a play so much as a routine, one that Fringe stalwart Guy Masterson clearly relishes. He's undoubtedly charismatic with a voice that shifts from sandpaper to velvet to Velcro, but Masterson needs reigning in first, and better material second. Ultimately, it's just too easy to imagine a play about an actor preparing to play an actor preparing to play Hamlet. (Matt Trueman)

■ *Assembly George Square*, 623 3030, until 26 Aug (not 13), 2pm, £12–£14 (£10–£12).



BOTTLENECK

Haunting, horrifying tale, brought to life by vivid writing ●●●●●

By the time you realise precisely what Luke Barnes' play is up to, it's already too late. You're already in the thick of it. Far be it from me to let on. If you saw it coming, it could easily seem indulgent and crass. Instead, Barnes shows a familiar scar through fresh eyes, as lived experience not history.

Bottleneck seems to start in 2012. There's austerity in the air and a deepset suspicion of the police. Football and sex, ideally with a Kop End hero, provide the best route out of poverty.

Two days before his 15th birthday, Liverpudlian ragamuffin Greg is whizzing around his neighbourhood. It should, he says, be called Slag's End. He's crude, destructive and overbearing, but ultimately harmless: hot air and hyperactivity, too naïve to be taken seriously.

But he's still an arresting presence: so pent-up, so in need of something constructive. James Cooney plays him like a firework set off indoors, ricocheting off the walls of the claustrophobic Pleasance Attic. He seems an ASBO-in-waiting, but gradually – skilfully – Barnes shifts the time-frame. Paedophiles are the bogeymen de jour; John Barnes the hero. Greg's beloved Liverpool are still sponsored by Candy.

And suddenly, you're there: in the middle of this horrendous and iconic moment that's totally brought to life by Barnes' vividly expressionistic writing. He plucks details out of a background blur: fingernails digging into skin, tears squeezed out of their ducts. It's haunting and horrifying and Steven Atkinson's production, which seems over-energetic to start, surpasses itself with a quiet, taut dignity. In the middle of the melee, a boy celebrating his 15th birthday comes of age in an instant.

That time-shift is all-important. It makes you realise that nothing's changed, that, in this era of rampant inequality, the poor remain consigned to their fate like second-class passengers locked in on the lower decks of the Titanic. (Matt Trueman)

■ *Pleasance Courtyard*, 556 6550, until 26 Aug (not 13), 2pm, £9 (£8).

