

Words and Deeds

NARVIK

*Written by Lizzie Nunnery and directed by Hannah Tyrell-Pinder
at The Playhouse Studio, September 2015*

The small, intimate and some might say claustrophobic space of the Playhouse Studio is ideal for this “play with music” (as described by writer Lizzie Nunnery) which, although it roams land and sea, is narrowly focused on Jim’s memories, as he lies alone and helpless on his cellar floor. The flotsam and jetsam surrounding the tiny space – boat fenders, suitcases, washtub, bunkbeds, piano, etc. – represent aspects of his past, and some are used as musical instruments (and not just the obvious ones). For much of the time, the musicians themselves (Nunnery, Martin Heslop and Vidar Norheim) are also crouched at the edge of the action, ready to rise and add their Greek chorus-like explanatory songs and to participate as minor characters in the drama.

In the Afterwords to tonight’s performance, Nunnery explains how parts of the play are drawn from her grandad’s life, including the cellar fall and ensuing helplessness, which makes an excellent, extremely gut-wrenching and upsetting framing device. Joe Shipman’s portrayal is note-perfect, transforming himself from a virile young man by the adoption of quivering hands and shaking voice alone. We feel for Jim, as he lies in his cellar, struggling to get up, railing at his uncooperative body, and asking why lost Norwegian love Else (Nina Yndis) has come into his mind, a woman he knew 70 years ago, rather than his wife.

It becomes clear that unfinished business is queuing up to torment Jim, in the shape of the woman he loved before and during WWII, and Kenny (Lucas Smith), the man with whom he served. We see two love stories developing: the one between Jim and Else and the (unrequited) one between Jim and Kenny – camaraderie tinged with Kenny’s sudden lunge at Jim on deck one night.

The songs, when they come, either add to the narrative or – in the case of the scene following the most distressing monologue of the play – rip us out of the horror and into a whirling Russian night of alcohol and dancing, where we realise that the war is over, and where Jim and Kenny fight – extremely realistically – and their friendship seems lost.

Back to that scene: Jim’s harrowing description of the ship coming under direct attack, the sounds, the water rising as the ship sinks, the command to close the hatches – even though there are men still below decks, the sounds of those men – tapping, banging, scratching for salvation as they drown – accompanied by the harsh, percussive slaps of the cast’s palms on the floor is physically draining. A moment to sit quietly and let the emotion seep away, to process the horror, would be welcome, but we are dragged back into exhilarating, annihilating life. More trauma follows, as Else is reintroduced and her fate acted out in echo of another episode from history (Nunnery has done her homework, and it shows) – the persecution and death of women seen as Nazi ‘collaborators’.

The ending is ambiguous – salvation or death? It is left to the audience to decide. Our decision? We’ll sit through this play with music again – anytime, anywhere.

Let me turn your deeds into words