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Double Bill: A Lady of Substance and The Death of Norman Tortilla

Jon Cooper / Charlotte Coates Sheer Drop Theatre Tristan Bates Theatre

From 20 March 2012 to 14 April 2012

This double bill offers a harsh glimpse into the lives individuals living in London flats which isolate them from the outside world.

Both scripts brim with characters screaming at the world and each other, conflicted and tormented driven by circumstances far more complicated than apparent at first glance. There is a sense in both pieces that reality is warped and that these characters are experiencing its jagged edges. Time however, marches on and life will continue with or without their protestations of injustice. It is how they choose to deal with the injustices that will eventually define them.

The Death of Norman Tortilla by Charlotte Coates

Set in the flat of an old man who insists that his death is imminent (and featuring a Polish care worker and an excitable salesgirl) this is a piece in which the direction of the storyline cannot be predicted in advance. It twists and turns neatly and is precisely the sort of comedy where you feel guilty for laughing at a situation which becomes increasingly absurd and disturbing.

Robert Gill is superb in the title role of Norman Tortilla, playing this complicated individual with a flamboyant and yet tragic air. The combination of his considered physicality and comical intonation creates a ridiculous and yet somehow likeable character caught up in his own world and obsessed by his desire for acceptance.

Forcing her way into his flat, Tandie (Morag Sims) gets drawn into his world and 'relationship' with carer Jack (Nicholas Ruben) and becomes increasingly tangled in the fallout of their row.

Sims creates a bubbly yet surprisingly kinky character, and although Tandie can be considered a victim, there is clearly far more lurking beneath the surface of this young woman. There are flashes of her temper and need for control which well match the creepy outbursts from Ruben's brooding and mechanical Jack. All three actors are careful not to overplay their different versions of madness despite the air of unreality in the production.

Running at 90 minutes, this is a punchy piece which does not outstay its welcome. The situation partially resolves and the audience's brief peek into Tortilla's world swiftly ends with a shock finale. The themes of dominance and control are skilfully negotiated in this script and, with all of the revelations within, it is hard to make any moral judgements upon any of the characters. Tortilla may have been a 'golden boy' but we can only take his word for it.