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saints and sinners of the stage and screen

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The Magic Tower Pentameters Theatre 18th February 2014

★★★★☆

Another Tennessee Williams UK premiere, you say? Ambassador, you're really spoiling us. This time, it's the utterly charming Pentameters Theatre - a Hampstead gem run by the equally delightful Leonie Scott-Matthews - that has landed the goods. And goods is an apt, if grammatically incorrect, way to describe director Seamus Newham's realisation of the two one-acts here, *The Magic Tower* and *The Strangest Kind of Romance*. Even, perhaps, greats.



Photography provided by Pentameters Theatre

In the first piece, the headliner, we again see Williams' woman wanting to escape from reality but not by shacking up with another guy, rather plunging headlong into a world of fantasy. Linda (Julia Taylor) is married to struggling young artist Jim (Wim Mellor) and living in the run-down attic of Irish battleaxe Mrs O'Fallon (Victoria Kempton). And the grimy walls - punctuated with Jim's works actually created by various art students from around the world - flea-bitten couch and sad, limp bed certainly evoke the feelings of the Great Depression, both of America and Linda. So she creates a magic tower in her mind, which Jim isn't allowed to leave for even one moment, or the enchantment will fade and she'll be confronted with the crushing reality of her situation.

This is helped along with the introduction of her old showbiz colleagues, Mitch (played with weasley smarm by Damian Regan) and Babe (Claire-Monique Martin) who try to convince her to join the old act while Jim's out. It's here that Newham gets the balance of comedy and tragedy just right. The new arrivals, all talk and - especially in Martin's case - barely disguise contempt. Babe's spiteful, screeching self-interest is both loathsome and humorous. The pair hint that, while the tower walls have come tumbling down, the alternative freedom might not be all that it's cracked up to be. Linda knows the glitz and glamour of that world, but the audience only sees it via Mitch and Babe, and it's Newham's decision to make them borderline grotesques that adds an even deeper tragedy to the whole work. And Taylor does tragedy well, flitting between wide-eyed joy and utter sadness.

The second piece, linked by Great Depression, is also more subtly joined by the almost imperceptible act of Newham putting the window in the same place. I say "putting", I mean "having the actors mime". It draws a connection between the sanctuaries and furthers the means of escape. Latterly, it features *The Little Man* (Alex Froome) who - rather than proactively creating an elaborate, separate narrative for himself - simply chooses not to engage with the world at all, a "ghost of a man". Exploited by *The Landlady* (Francesca Wilde) his only love is for a cat, *Nitchevo*. Again, there are laughs within the misery, with Wilde's forthright and domineering sexuality eliciting looks of horror and panic from Froome. While he initially plays it close to his chest, too understated, in the final moments of mania he shines. But he mimes one consistent cat.

Nitchevo, if you're wondering, is a Russian word meaning either "nothing", "what does it matter?" or "never mind" depending on which Google Translate result you favour. It's Williams at his darkly witty best, with *The Little Man* placing all of his meaning in, essentially, absolutely zero - nihilism lols! This is just as profound against the backdrop of Jeffry Kwaplow's *Old Man* and his impassioned speech of his struggle to stay relevant despite being ridden roughshod over by, as contemporary audiences would have it, simply "The Man".

As is plastered all over the publicity, Williams himself said: "I don't want realism, I want magic!" While we're not talking Fantasia levels here, with its cracking cast, crisp yet knowing direction, absolutely enchanting venue and - best of all - the man himself on fine form, it's as near as damn it.

The Magic Tower opened on 4th February and runs until 23rd February 2014 at Pentameters Theatre.

Nearest tube station: Hampstead (**Northern**)