

Edinburgh Festival Theatre Reviews: Pussy Riot: Riot Days/First Snow/Unsung

Mark Brown

Pussy Riot

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UNSUNG

Summerhall

Until August 26

Reviewed by Mark Brown

Pussy Riot. The name of the Russian radical feminist punk band is synonymous with counter-cultural opposition to the regime of Vladimir Putin.

Their extraordinary guerrilla action (condemning the Orthodox Church's support for Putin) inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow led to prison sentences for three band members. A pitch invasion (disguised as cops) at the World Cup Final last month, which led to more jail terms, was a reminder that the group remains in the forefront of activism against the Russian state.

The band's show, Pussy Riot: Riot Days, which ends a 10-day residency at Summerhall tonight, is a remarkable piece of event theatre. Part performance art, part punk gig, part documentary theatre, it is a high-octane, no compromise account of the band's astonishing, frenetic history.

The band performs in front of a large screen on which we see videos, photographs and cartoons relating to Pussy Riot actions, the Putin regime and state repression (both of the band and opposition movements in general). Meanwhile, the group speaks, shouts, chants and sings (in Russian with English surtitles) a text comprised of a biography of the company and forceful political commentary; this text draws upon the book Riot Days by band member Maria Alyokhina.

All of this is accompanied by a loud and fabulously relentless soundtrack of electro-punk music infused powerfully with the sound of a discordant alto saxophone. The total effect is, simultaneously, intense, invigorating, chilling and encouraging.

Alyokhina's account of life inside Putin's penal colony (his very own, 21st-century Gulag) is appalling and enraging. However, the extraordinary courage of these punk activists shines like a beacon, as does their raw and brilliant show.

Only a little less raw, and certainly less brilliant, is *First Snow*. A co-production by the National Theatre of Scotland and Montreal-based companies Productions Hotel-Motel and Theatre PAP, the play draws upon the considerable political parallels between Scotland and Quebec.

However, co-authored by Davey Anderson, Philippe Ducros and Linda McLean, and directed by Patrice Dubois, it is not a work made light by many hands. It is, rather, a disappointingly overwrought spoiled broth of collaborative theatre.

Performed on a minimalistically stylised set, the drama uses an emotionally charged gathering of an extended family at a Quebecois country house as a none-too-subtle metaphor for the current political conditions of Quebec and Scotland. Performed in English and occasional French (the latter of which is, with postmodern self-consciousness, translated intermittently in surtitles) the piece cuts back-and-forth between a rarely interesting family drama and drearily polemical political commentary.

The heavy-handedness of the political metaphor is attended by a cut-up, postmodern form (characters, whose identities are blurred with those of the actors themselves, break from the action to elucidate, converse with the audience and question each other). It is a tiresome theatrical style that we had every right to believe had long since exhausted itself.

The cast is comprised, for the most part, of fine actors. It is ironic, however, that, while this major theatre collaboration was failing to set the heather alight on the Edinburgh Fringe, the youth theatre companies Junction 25 (Scotland) and Theater and der Parkaue (Germany) were offering (in their show *1,210km*) an altogether more successful work of cross-cultural drama as part of Glasgow's European Championships Festival.

If one is seeking an antidote to the misfiring *First Snow*, get along to Summerhall where the superb writer and actor Valentijn Dhaenens, of Antwerp-based company SKaGeN, is performing the superb political monodrama *Unsung*. Making innovative use of a mobile phone, recorded audio and a video screen, Dhaenens (who is known to Edinburgh Fringe audiences for the fine works *BigMOUTH* and *SmallWaR*) creates a compelling, humorous and, ultimately, discomfiting portrait of a career politician.

Sharp-suited, image-conscious, cynical and ruthless Dhaenens's politician is reminiscent, at the outset, of Tony Blair in the early days of New Labour or Emmanuel Macron during his meteoric rise. A private phone call in which he professes friendship towards "Fatso", his rival for the party leadership, before threatening to destroy his political career, has fascinating echoes of the famous Islington meeting between Blair and Gordon Brown.

However, the deeper Dhaenens takes us into the politician's fractured and precarious private life, the more we see a man who is soul-breakingly lonely. Brilliantly performed and beautifully presented, it is a work of tremendous political and human insight, and of remarkable empathy.

There is another superb solo performance in Simon Callow's rendering of Oscar Wilde's powerful prison letter *De Profundis* (Assembly Rooms, until August 26). Callow has the performative measure of the bitterness, rage, humiliation, love and enduring, self-regarding wit of Wilde's great text. It makes for a deeply moving 90 minutes of theatre.

Square Go, by Scottish writers Kieran Hurley and Gary McNair, (Summerhall, until August 26) is a modest, dark comedy about playground violence in Scottish schools. Predictable in its structural shifts, to-and-fro, between nostalgic humour and very deliberate pathos, it is not what one would call a nuanced work. It does, however, succeed in raising a few smiles of recognition, and in capturing something of the essence of a distressing reality of Scottish school life.

Penelope Skinner's Meek (Traverse, until August 26) is a brave attempt at creating a tragedy of Atwoodian neo-futurism (with a curious and unexplained Icelandic dimension). A tale of a brutal, fascistic, misogynist Christian theocracy, the play lacks the necessary depth of both character and narrative.