

The Twilight Zone

An Almeida Theatre production adapted by Anne Washburn.
Directed by Richard Jones. The Ambassadors Theatre, London.
Attended on Saturday 16 March 2019.

By Anne-Louise Fortune



Cast of *The Twilight Zone*, the Ambassadors Theatre, 2019.
Photo: © Johan Persson.

I have settled into my seat in the snug surroundings of the Ambassadors Theatre in London's West End as I wait for the evening's performance to begin. I am here to review *The Twilight Zone* for an online and print magazine. The original 1959 television version of *The Twilight Zone* has become a by-word for stories of psychological horror and unexpected twists, and so in this theatrical version I am expecting to be taken on a journey into strange, alien worlds, that ask us to interrogate our prejudices and norms. The intimacy of the auditorium creates a sense of suspense. The scene is set by the theatre's safety curtain which has been remodelled to resemble a retro monochrome analogue receiver, complete with tuning dials and a now obsolete CBS logo in the shape of a human eye. I am struck by the sense of familiarity this creates: it feels as if we are gathering around the TV set as one great extended

family, waiting for broadcasting to begin. In an era of smartphones, streaming and multiple screens, this sense of community and focus is a welcome respite from the 'always on' pressures of the digital age.

I will not be paid for writing the review, although my ticket and souvenir programme are both complimentary because as a member of the 'press' my opinion is valued and respected. As a theatre-maker, I have a comprehensive knowledge of the processes and creative decisions involved in theatre production. My brief for the evening is to watch the show, review it overnight for the magazine, and assign it a star value out of ten. As reductive as the star system may be, it is still the basis of most entertainment marketing campaigns, and the implication from PR agencies is that a star rating and a 'pull quote' are the expected outcome of allowing critics complimentary access to their commodities. It is this system to which the public, we are told, gives credence. Whilst we as critics may consider the system to be problematic, if we attempt to dismiss it what will it be replaced by? In an era which seeks to encompass the totality of cultural experience in a five second GIF or a 280 character tweet, what value is there in more a considered, academic response?

Evocative of the fast-paced, fleeting nature of online culture, the structure of the show consists of eight storylines. Rarely told in a linear format, fragmented strands overlap and interweave, flowing mercurially through the productions structure, as trending tweets and news alerts monopolise our screens. Opening with the full ensemble cast, the first narrative offers a slice of classic American retro-cultural nostalgia. A group of strangers find themselves forced into a remote roadside diner when a police officer appears. It is made known that a member of the party is an 'alien', and those assembled must deduce who is the interloper of the group. Quickly the conversation descends into accusations and hyperbole, and we are introduced to several of the stereotypes who we will encounter throughout the show: the vamp; the young girl; the cynical wise-cracker. Moments of silence punctuate the dispute, but rather than fuelling tension, this moment seemed to disengage the audience.

As the diverse cast move into a scene change, I am struck once again by the aesthetic of the production. It has been beautifully crafted by set designer Paul Steinberg and costume designer Nicky Gillibrand, invoking the disorienting atmosphere of the TV show to perfection. Paying homage to the original broadcasts, Steinberg and Gillibrand created a retro-monochrome world, complete with costumes in shades of black, white and grey. The set is akin to what we might imagine the inside of a TV set to look like – a black box with white stars of myriad sizes, which cleverly manipulates our understanding of the size of the playing space. The stars remind me of my remit – that I must place a numerical value on the worth of the production. Iconography from the show move across the stage on rotating discs in choreographed movement sequences, whilst larger items of set are moved on and off stage behind them as tracks from a score by Sarah Angliss play during moments of transition. Each of these elements: innovative set changes, nostalgic TV show references, and evocative soundtracks, elevate the production and create the sense that you are on the edge of experiencing something quite incredible. Although, this ‘something’ is never quite realised. Despite the undeniable artistry and conceptualisation of the design, the show consistently feels more like an transitory aesthetic experience than a cohesive piece of theatre.

The magazine I am writing for doesn't delineate to its reviewers how the rating system operates, other than to state that anything to be awarded ten out of ten must be 'perfect', although I have concerns regarding this frame of reference. Surely the highest marks should be awarded for a performance which offers its audience something greater on an experiential level, rather than necessarily being free of any flaws? Indeed, if a production was free of flaws, would it be a rewarding experience? If all the possible moments of failure and difference in a performance have been erased, would it be as entertaining and fulfilling to an audience? Having already transferred from an Off-West End venue to the Ambassadors Theatre, there's a clear possibility that the show may progress onto Broadway, or perhaps a national tour. At such a crucial moment in the show's development, it is understood that the

voice of a critic can and will be used to promote (or demote) the shows future incarnations. Yet, with a star rating that doesn't align with the system used by other outlets, and with the delay between press night and my viewing of the show, I am uncertain of the reach and impact of my review. All the ingredients are in place for this show to deliver an amazing evening at the theatre, but it is in the stories themselves that the production doesn't quite come to life. Although well scripted, flawlessly directed, and technically delivered with aplomb, there is nothing that *affects* me. It seems somewhat ironic that whilst I am considering the desensitising nature of technology and instant culture from the position of a critic, these aesthetic elements turn out to be the moments in which this live performance excels. As a collection of nostalgic tropes and an exercise in recreating the world of a TV show, this production is a success, but as a piece of narrative theatre the show fell short. Lacking relevancy, intensity and intrigue, it was as if it had been frozen in the late 1960's, only to be defrosted over half a century later, and served lukewarm to its audience.

I complete my review overnight and award the show seven out of the ten possible stars, yet I am left feeling unfulfilled. In a digital world saturated with illimitable content and opinions, what is the value of a critical review? Is it to be used by our publishers as a demonstration of their legitimacy and relevance? Is it to gain exposure for ourselves and our opinions, as we try to become noticed in an ever-crowded marketplace of 'experts'? In a system which we as critics may consider to be problematic, do we have to conform, at least partially, in order to be regarded as relevant? Should we adhere to the star system whilst providing criticism for those readers who do wish for a more considered response? In this era of instant response, perhaps there is still a place for the more considered response. Perhaps when GIFs have evolved and tweets have become too fleeting and too numerous to attract any attention, and the reductive nature of the star-rating system has been exposed as flawed, perhaps then the more considered response may be the one which endures.