

GREATER MANCHESTER DRAMA FEDERATION

Society	CHADS
Title	Stones in His Pockets
Author	Marie Jones
Date & Time	18.9.2018, 7.45
Venue	CHADS Studio

Production highlights:

- Full range of theatrical dynamics
- Delightful two-handed playing
- Fast, fluid action
- Strong characterisation
- Lack of self-conscious acting
- Flawless Irish accents
- Smart integration with sound and lights

To think about for the future:

- Tightening up sound effects—underplay where necessary

THE PRODUCTION

Adjudicator writes and identifies themes, challenges and requirements, etc., and details the requirements and elements of the production in which he was particularly interested.

Written by Belfast-based playwright Marie Jones and first staged in 1996, *Stones in His Pockets* has been produced in more than thirty countries and has garnered numerous awards. Its themes remain strikingly relevant today. *Stones in His Pockets* begs each of us to take a long, hard look at the extras in the background—the Sean Harkins of this world—that exist not just in films, but in our everyday lives as well.

At face value *Stones in His Pockets* is a play about the making of a film. But it goes much deeper than that. Set in rural Ireland, working on the film is one of the few decent-paying jobs available in a town that has been rendered nearly obsolete as the local farms have slowly died out, one after another. Two local men, Jake (world-weary, pessimistic) and Charlie (eternally optimistic) strike up an immediate friendship. Each actor must inhabit a myriad of roles in addition to Jack and Charlie—other townspeople, the film's crew, childhood versions of themselves—while seamlessly transitioning between accents, ages and genders.

Stones in His Pockets won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Comedy in 2001.

TECHNICAL

Set and props

A set which shows creativity and innovation and addresses the style of the production. Is well constructed. Props which are in period, authentic in appearance and placed strategically e.g. furniture.

There is effectively no set, as such, just exits right and left, a pale grey backdrop, a low platform and two moveable blocks. This allowed rapid changes of scene, with slick lighting changes.

The platform added a useful change of level and a focussed second playing area. The blocks were used as necessary and were quick and easy to relocate.

The only prop was Charlie's script. A clothes rail SL allowed quick access to costume changes.

Simplicity was key.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting and sound effects which contribute towards the dramatic potential, etc.

Lighting was carefully set and inventive—mostly a broad orange wash but with important changes, different washes for different scenes and excellent gobos. Cueing was crisp and perfectly executed.

The music was well-chosen at the right volume and flawlessly integrated, with the exception of the long C+W instrumental in the bar scene (the piece immediately after 'Jolene'). This seemed to last for hours and was unduly distracting. The Indian sitar/tabla piece was ideal.

Sound effects, and there were many, were applied well, although the ambient effects in the bar could have been faded much sooner—they should set the scene but not dominate it unless the script dictates. Yes, I heard the subtle tape reverse effect at the beginning of act two – this shows an impressive attention to detail. Make sure that the closing music continues until the auditorium is clear—don't break the spell as the audience leave.

Overall, this production had a very high level of technical invention and execution.

Costumes

Costumes which are in of the period, well fitting, colour co-ordinated and enhance characterisation.

Simple rustic costumes, with caps. Charlie's waistcoat did look very dapper, but I can understand why it was chosen.

Jake's shirt had alarming brown stains. If this was alluding to a working-man's shirt, then a good kick around the car park would have given it authentic grime.

I think both characters should have worn different casual shirts in the second act as time has passed since the bar scene in act 1. They most certainly would have worn collared shirts, not t-shirts at the funeral and wake.

Makeup and hair

Make hair and wigs which are in period and appropriate to the production (including size of venue) and assist in developing the character.

No issues.

DIRECTION

Detailed study/knowledge and interpretation of the text; progressing the author's intent with creativity and sensitivity. Using theatrical dynamics to communicate with the audience. Appropriate delivery of the text using timing and rhythm. Settings with regard to focus, pace and groupings. Movement which is appropriate to the period and style of production. Creating atmosphere and mood to develop the full dramatic impact.

Directors: Mike Rogerson and Sheila Burt.

Directing in the theatre should, at its most basic level, focus on three elements: dynamics, pace and characterisation.

To stage a scene successfully you must consider its rhythm and dynamics. There are many separate scenes in *Stones in His Pockets* that must not only run seamlessly but each must also have a journey and character of its own. There are moments where tension and atmosphere build, moments of activity, stillness, pauses and sections of higher and lower energy. In this production we saw quieter moments, drama, physicality and comedy. These different elements drawn into a cohesive whole were a key success in this production.

Secondly, pace. Very often, we see actors who were slow in picking up cues, and this can be deadly. Whereas there was no evidence of searching for lines—these were relentlessly secure—at times, pace needed to be picked up very slightly, especially in the first act. But this is a very minor criticism as, in general, pace was good and dialogue over-lapped to push the action along.

Finally, characterisation. Whatever the genre, most directors would start, quite naturally, with characterisation. Clearly, much important character work had taken place here. As the play progressed, we began to see the important individuality emerge from Charlie and Jake and, to a lesser extent to the diverse minor characters. With fifteen characters to define, and no changes costume or props to utilise, it was important for the audience to be immediately able to tell from posture and voice alone when characters changed. This was handled superbly and both director and actors are to be applauded here. Careful attention to body language added humanity both to the main characters to the sometimes thinly written minor characters: Sean's sniffing, Fin's stutter, Aisling's headset.

Mike's planning for blocking moves and the rehearsal sessions for these must have been extensive: from the opening choreographed head ballet to the looks of dispossession, the bumps and turns of the bus to the synchronised peat cutting. Every move and every scene change was slick, natural and believable. On occasion, the 4th wall was broken: "do you know where the cart was going?" (not in the script), and "there's not a man in here who would get a look in". This could easily have been overdone, but was reigned in.

All of this was underpinned by carefully chosen and adeptly executed technicals.

In conclusion, *Stones on His Pockets* was a bold choice requiring a skilled hand. The craft in evidence here was palpable.

ACTING

Characterisation which is believable shows flair, originality and understanding. Vocal technique which is appropriate to the play and is delivered with understanding and a good technique. Movement which is in character and in period and incorporating movement to deliver pace. Supporting ones fellow actor unselfishly and enhancing his performance. Using all available theatrical skills to make a noticeable contribution to the play.

Jake and Charlie (Anthony Josephson and Adrian Barrowdale)

I'm going to break with convention and not separate the two performances this evening. Quite simply, in this two-hander with both actors on stage throughout, any weakness from either actor would fatally wound the production.

Anthony and Adrian gave us performances of the highest quality: it is difficult to fault not only their individual performances but, crucially their interaction with each other. They each displayed a complete command of vocal and movement skills.

Firstly, accents. These were flawless. We are told early on that Charlie is from Ballycastle—County Antrim. The declarative sentences of the spiedy talk of Belfast Norn Iron— which end in a rise in pitch, a question-like intonation pattern—were toned down as befits a more rural upbringing, but crucially, we heard the important centralised pronunciation of the diphthong in words like “mouth” or “now”. Anthony’s accent was wholly convincing from start to finish. Jake is from Kerry and I was worried we’d hear the caricatured accents of Craggy Island. Thankfully, even though Adrian’s accent was more high-pitched and Oirish than Anthony’s, there was no sign of Mrs Doyle. To the best of my knowledge, Adrian is not a Kerryman. You could have fooled me. All other accents—the cut-glass voice coach, the laid-back Hollywood star, the posh Irish reporter—were well-observed and, with a very few slips, confidently and naturally delivered. I wasn’t, however, convinced by Jock’s accent at all—shades of Willie the groundskeeper at Springfield Elementary I’m afraid. But, overall, these other accents were good, consistent and contrasted well with the main Irish voices.

Physicality was excellent, from the opening head ballet, through consistent movement across the playing area, to co-ordinated scene setting, Irish dancing, quick entrances and exits and different physical stances for different characters.

Whether it was Charlie’s eternal optimism or Jake’s more grounded realism, or the otherworldly Caroline, the upright John, the bullish Jock, cantankerous Mickey (his “then how come I’m only getting forty quid?” got the biggest laugh of the evening), the uber-luvvie Clem, the annoyingly shrill Aisling, the anxious Sean, the stuttering Fin... in every case characterisation was created with sensitivity, originality and flair. Timing of lines was spot on—with the confidence to pause before lines such as “ah no, fuck, it’s you”, “I’ll think about it” and “I just want to know what makes you tick.”

There was a thorough awareness of audience throughout and the support between the two members of the cast demonstrated commitment and a high understanding of the generosity needed in ensemble playing. The drama in the final minutes—“I could have given him hope”—was powerful without unnecessary pathos. We ended on a note of catharsis and optimism.

All in all, both Anthony and Adrian were perfectly cast and demonstrated an excellent understanding of theatre skills within their totally convincing performances: empathetic, funny, engaging, rewarding and commanding.

OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT

An excellent understanding of the author's intent. Direction which shows skill, originality, sensitivity and creativity using all the theatrical tools of pace, focus, delivery, timing and rhythm. Talented actors creating highly effective dramatic impact. Evidence of teamwork and unselfish ensemble playing. Actors who interact and react and a production team who use all resources to create atmosphere and mood.

This was a very confident realisation and interpretation of the text. This play is as much about action as dialogue and the physicality and characterisation required in this production was achieved with panache. There was a creative and positive dramatic impact throughout. This production achieved its objectives and we were fulfilled in both the delivery and execution.

In *Stones in his Pockets*, the interaction between the actors is crucial. We saw very positive support between the members of the cast, no doubt well-drilled by the director. Vocal pace, blocking and ensemble playing was generally excellent. Accents were outstanding.

We saw a highly developed understanding of theatrical communication: immersive theatre at its best. This can only be achieved by actors and director having complete control of their material and having the skills to bring the material strikingly to life.

In conclusion, *Stones in His Pockets* was a bold but inspired choice. In this play, the director needs vision, a delicate touch and tight attention to detail. Both actors must work as a single, fluid unit from of a total lack of abandon at one end of the scale, to the ability for quieter moments of sharp observations on fate, life and death at the other.

If any of these elements is missing, the production will fail. CHADS' production succeeded in just about every aspect.

This is a tribute to everyone involved.

<i>Adjudicator (print)</i>	<i>Andrew Wild</i>
<i>Adjudicator (sign)</i>	
<i>Date</i>	<i>20.9.2018</i>