

Stand By Your Van: Reviews

Jonathan Tilley, Three Weeks

Walking into the Pleasance Grand for this felt like arriving at a TV studio for an actual game show. There is the flamboyant host, the contestants, and even a klaxon. And centre stage, there's a great big silver truck, which is surely the biggest and most expensive prop of any of the shows on this month. But this isn't a reality TV show. What this is, is the story of twelve people, with very different personalities and very different motivations, put together for eighty hours without sleep, and united by their powerful desire to win. What this is, is powerful, gripping, hilarious, moving, upsetting, uplifting, and heart-rending drama. What this is, is a show that demonstrates what theatre can do.

Euan Ferguson, The Observer, 16/08/09

They whooped and stomped, drunk only on the possibilities of money and fame, in Stand by Your Van, which started as one thing and ended up another. It's ostensibly a parody on reality shows – this one based on an actual midwest gameshow phenomenon of a few years ago, whereby the last person left with one hand on a big shiny truck won the machine – but it becomes clear after half an hour that our recent experience of reality shows can't be parodied. I grew faintly disappointed that the two-dimensional contestants – fingernail model, ex-squaddie, angry Jock, born-again meddler, etc – were being given such predictable interaction that we hardly cared for whom the klaxon next sounded. But then, as we neared 80 hours, it turned into They Shoot Horses, Don't They?: the weepy misery of exhaustion seeped from the stage like a miasma, as they wondered why any of their lives had come to this. There are four different endings, but in the end I suspect they'll all be the same, which is that no one truly wins; and perhaps thus a far, far better satire on the whole thing than had seemed possible. Slick and worrying and still enjoyable, I suspect this will be a busy, busy show.

Fiona Mountford, Evening Standard 19/08/09

Here's a concept that will make a show stand out on an overcrowded Fringe....Yep, this "man to van combat", so thrillingly transposed into an English setting by Anna Reynolds, is apparently what they do to pass the time in Texas...Director Paul Bourne certainly knows how to work an audience. There's a whooping, adrenaline-packed start, as our pumped-up compere Phil (Darren Strange, treading an expert line between hearty and condescending) introduces us to the participants. He then exits and a dozen people are left looking exceedingly silly clutching a large piece of grey metal.

Time constraints mean that we perforce only get thumbnail sketches of the determined/damaged individuals involved but what's compelling is the sheer grim fascination of watching people put themselves through this sort of physical and mental torture. As the hours tick agonisingly away on a big-screen clock, the ever-dwindling rivals form shifting allegiances and then, as the sleep deprivation bites and even Phil starts going slightly bonkers, they turn on each other Lord of the Flies-style.

It's pop culture psychological acuity of the sort that, for a few minutes long ago, Big Brother promised to have, and it's gripping.

Alan Chadwick, Metro 17/08/09

While it ain't Faust, it's easy-on-the-brain, fun, populist entertainment well served by its ensemble cast including Darren Strange as our manic unfeeling host, Phil 'The Lip'...where the show really succeeds is in making you feel you're part of a studio audience, with the extra twist that the keys go to a different winner every night.

British Theatre Guide

I had the same feeling when I first saw Bouncers by Godber: whether I liked it or not, this was going to be a successful show. There was something about the confidence with which the whole thing started up. Well, in a new era, this one has caught the zeitgeist too...Based around mid-US game shows, where people put themselves through just about anything to get their obligatory five minutes of fame and a life-changing prize, this show captures the madness of our times...Again, just like Godber, the characters are 2D stereotypes who, despite their cartoon status, manage to deliver real emotions and comment. These are characters who represent social archetypes from across the entire country; so, we have characters from Wales, Glasgow, the home counties and the north east, as well as the range of ages and social backgrounds. This is a metaphor for the UK today: community and altruism versus individual goals and desires. Just how far will people go to win what is essentially a piece of metal?

*Competition, desperation and envy are some of the themes of the show. With the tiredness comes desperation. When Elizabeth, a woman determined to raise awareness of breast cancer, starts to lecture the other contestants, she is treated to disdain, hatred and even violence. It would be unfair to highlight individual actors; this is a truly ensemble piece. By relaying the events live on television monitors, Director Paul Bourne adds a flavour of more familiar endurance spectacles such as *The Apprentice* and *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!* The camera focuses on the hands and faces, so you get a sense of both scale and intimacy. *Stand By Your Van* condenses 80 hours of action from one of the most bizarre competitions ever dreamed up into 80 minutes of interactive, 'live competition' theatre. This one has legs.*

Taniith Lindon, What's On Stage

*Menagerie's *Stand by Your Van* is a play that totally captures the guilty pleasure genre that now that engulfs our televisions: busting with primetime TV energy, we watch time tick down on a bizarre endurance test with 12 equally bizarre contestants. The prize: a shiny new truck. The rules: you must keep your hand on the truck at all times, if you let go, you're out. Plot-wise, it's very clear where this piece is going from the start, and consequently the enjoyment comes from the mix of characters and comic twists. Playwright Anna Reynolds has written several different endings, so the winner may change depending on when you go, and the characters are delivered with enough light and shade amid the comedy to give you several favourites....What keeps you with the contest is the interaction between the characters; the glimmers of romance, dirty dealings and frustrated dreams that have led them all to this sad and desperate spot.*

Stand by Your Van isn't life-altering; but it's a perfect piece of festival fun – with enough heart, laughs and a firm finger on the pop pulse to pack the Pleasance each night.

Also Read Mark Fisher's [interview with director Paul Bourne in The List](#).