

Review of 'Contractions' at the Alexander Bar

By Laura Davidson

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Having come from the corporate world, I was curious to see Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (directed by Greg Karvellas). Initially a radio drama called 'Love Contract', it was first presented by London's Royal Court Theatre, and has debuted in South Africa at the Alexander Bar. With only two characters and a bleak, unchanging stage, one might have expected difficulty in retaining the audience's attention. However, the relentless repetition is part of what makes this brutal black comedy work.

The tenor of this thought-provoking play is clear from the curtain's rise. Whilst friendly platitudes emanate from the manager's mouth, she does not so much as glance up from her desk when a company employee enters at her behest. Brilliantly played by Janna Ramos-Violante, the heavy balance of power is firmly in the icily cold and nameless manager's hands, as she casts fake smiles. Equally good is Emily Child, whose portrayal of Emma, the eager, slightly confused new recruit to the company, is a mastery of psychological understanding. The matching corporate uniforms and severe, business-like hairstyles of the two women is in stark contrast to their vastly different characters.

The manager's intrusive questioning during Emma's company reviews is both comical and uncomfortable, as romance is defined by a contract; something clinical and calculated, to be avoided or reported. Romantic and/or sexual liaisons between employees are not banned. Similarly, they are not explicitly discouraged. But as the manager points out, such entanglements might affect "morale". More to the point, they might interfere with the company's money-making aspirations. Expect a harsh critique of corporate culture – a culture where there is no room for "mess, play or failure", for which Emma begins to yearn. The manager's thinly-veiled façade of concern for her employee's wellbeing is but a petulant nod towards the company's duty of care.

The title of *Contractions* is a clever play on words, emphasising the purely contractual nature of the relationship between the company and its employees, and foreshadowing of the birth of Emma's baby. In today's fragile economy with much less stable employment than in previous generations, this play is a powerful denigration of the extremes one might feel it necessary to go to in order to maintain a soulless job and put food on the table. Between the groundhog day scenes, the table glows, as if a reminder of the higher corporate powers watching its workers' every move, reminiscent of Orwell's 1984. At one point Emma ends her relationship with Darren at her company's behest, but she need not have told anyone since it is all caught on camera. Towards the finale, a chilling reference to psychiatry unnervingly conjures up the image of a Victorian asylum; it is clear that Emma would do best to acquiesce.

It is the disparity in the balance of power within this production which is so disturbing – Emma neither knows her manager's name, nor whether she has a life beyond the office; indeed, whether she is anything but a robot. The tension building between the two characters is palpable. Prior to the expiry of her fire, Emma twists the words of her contract into a weapon, neatly explaining how her 'relationship' with colleague Darren cannot be

“romantic” as defined by the company. But the corporate obsession with sales figures is catching; poor Emma lets her own needs slide in order to maintain them.

Ultimately, her transformation into a broken sales-machine, teetering on the brink of a much more sinister future, comes as no surprise. Personally, I love a black comedy – but the play may not be everyone’s cup of tea. It is the extent of the control which is so discomfoting. Still, the work is both intelligent and well-acted. And sometimes the very point of drama is to discomfort you, is it not? Show times: 3rd, 5th, 8th February at 7pm 9th - 13th February at 7pm and 9pm Cost: R90 - 100 per person Read more about Contractions [here](#).

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