

Megan Furniss entertains in one-woman show

Marilu Snyders

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There is an unfortunate tendency for a one-woman show (even - perhaps especially - one described as “theatre at its unsettling best”) to manifest itself as a lone writer/actress using the stage as a therapeutic platform to work through her broken psyche. The theatre world is well-stocked with tortured souls, and many a monologue is an onstage outlet for a self-indulgent hour or so of public introspection.

But when Megan Furniss’s small frame ran onto the tiny, well lit stage, we mistook her for a confused audience member who couldn’t find her seat. I half expected the lovely Alexander Bar staff to come and give her a hand, but then she turned to face us and started chatting. She unpacked her laptop and started her lecture. Within the first minute, I sat back – intrigued, amused and with a creeping awareness that this was unlike anything I had seen before.

On the stage, writer and actress Megan Furniss is presenting a literary lecture under the identity of Marion Taylor at the 2013 Grahamstown Think!Fest. She has been presenting this lecture for the last 16 years, and its popularity is a source of great pride. The topic of her lecture is ‘Great Journeys of our Time’, and opens with The Odyssey by Homer, a big slideshow of pictures depicting the story up on the screen behind her. All of a sudden, we are not an audience anymore, but a small hall of students. The shift is subtle but tangible. As she is telling the story, her theme digresses into a personal journey and it becomes a play again. We become an audience once more.

As she tracks back through her own memories, the character of Marion Taylor recalls the journey that brought her to the Think!Fest festival. She ticks off on a list the practical planning that goes into such a trip - the logistics of feeding the stray cat in her absence, the full packing of clothes but half packing of toiletries (some of which will still be required pre-departure), the repeated waking up every hour until the alarm clock finally goes off in the still-dark morning - and I start to see how we are all connected by each of our individual journeys. When she switches back into lecturer mode to tell us about Don Quixote, her road trip self is driving from darkness into light with the smell of sweet, hot thermos coffee filling the car and a great shuffle on the iPod.

Back and forth we go, further into the lecture, further onto the road. The Canterbury Tales blends seamlessly into awkward high school memories evoked by a Simba Chips packet and Dr Seuss’s Oh, the Places You’ll Go becomes the next allegory of the passage of life. We’re all on our own personal road trip at any given time.

Drive with Me has a strong local imprint, partly marked off by each of the small towns Taylor passes or stops at on the way to Grahamstown. We all know the names of these towns, we know the lay of the land, we know these feelings she steers us through. By the time Peter Straub and Stephen King enter the lecture, things take a rather darker angle. Observations about cultural differences surrounding death and minibus taxis fill her head and fill the stage. And a dip into the darkness brings back haunted memories, those ones that are only allowed to surface during long solitary drives on an endless road. With cross-references to The Wizard of Oz on the slideshow a sudden surreal element steps in, and you start to question her reality: Are these memories real, or imagined?

Drive with Me is a refreshing, meticulously written piece of theatre; insightful, informative and highly entertaining. The unique angle of the play is fully harnessed by director Liz Mills, and it is clear why this play won an Ovation Award at this year's Grahamstown Festival. A round of applause for Megan Furniss and for anyone who strives to keep theatre intelligent, innovative and creative.

'Drive with Me' ran from 20 to 22 November at the Alexander Bar and Cafe.

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