

THE FEAR OF 13, DONMAR WAREHOUSE (LONDON)

REVIEW

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Based on the life of Nick Yarris, a man mixed-up in and falsely sentenced for the rape and murder of a woman, resulting in him spending twenty-two years on death row, also inspiring David Sington's 2015 documentary of the same name, of which the play is also adapted from, *The Fear of 13*, written by **Lindsey Ferrentino**, premiered at London's intimate Donmar Warehouse in early October. Starring Academy Award winner, **Adrian Brody**, as Nick, alongside **Nana Mensah** as Jackie Schaffer, volunteer for an abolitionist group who becomes increasingly involved in Nick's story, this is an incredibly written and directed piece which tells a story well while subtly making the audience consider how they look at the people around them.

Ferrentino's text is incredibly innovative in that it doesn't run Yarris' story in an obvious chronological order (which I have reason to believe Sington's documentary does the same). The play instead begins with events recalled from when Yarris entered the prison, and it isn't until halfway through that we reverse right back to the beginning of Yarris' life, through their

childhood, and we find out why they are on death row. The story is played out in the present realities of Nick and Jackie as Jackie interviews Nick and we see the action being described, visualised. Hand-in-hand with **Justin Martin's** extremely abstract and dynamic direction, the production never has a potentially dull appearance of one character being interviewed by another character, because of how vast its storytelling is in conjunction with the framing of the writing, and so we get lost in and immersed in the story side of the proceedings. **Ferrentino's** script not only explores the importance of living your life and never taking it for granted, but also makes you reflect on how you see certain strangers, such as ex-convicts: Yarris might have done some bad things throughout their life, but they are not a bad person, and **Martin's** direction masterfully makes you connect to him and supplies great emotional catharsis come the end of the play.

Miriam Buether's set design exquisitely turns the theatre into the jail, expanding and opening out the performance space whilst maintaining the Donmar's

intimacy, with striking and atmospheric lighting of it by **Jon Clark**. **Buether**'s work is highly-detailed and includes some impressive coup de théâtre moments, as does **Brigitte Reiffensteul**'s costume design! In the early moments, the sound, attributed to **Ian Dickinson** (for Autograph), verges on being too loud, so not naturalistic when it needs to be, although, for much of the piece, they provide a soundscape that enhances the extent to which you really *feel* the story.

It's difficult to connect to **Brody** as Nick immediately as there is a perceived flatness to their characterisation, coming from them leaning into playing a template of a real person. Where performances such as this work the best is when an actor fuses this with authenticity from themselves. However, as the piece continues, this initial ambivalence is swept away, and the emotions and characterisation they conjure by the latter stages of their portrayal are spellbinding.

Mensah is outstanding as Jackie, conveying much nuance. They articulate what their character is telling extremely well, with a lot of varying feeling, and absorbs Jackie in Nick's story to a perfectly quantified amount.

Most of the supporting cast alternate roles and **Cyril Nri** is a particular standout in their rotation.

The Fear of 13 tells a story in a magnetising, utterly compelling way, captivating with its writing and vision.

(Four stars) ★★★★★

(The Fear of 13 played at the Donmar Warehouse, London, Friday 4th October (opened, Thursday 10th October) - Saturday 30th November 2024.)