

STRIPPED BY HEW ROUS-EYRE
AUGUST 2019 AT THE KING'S HEAD THEATRE
DIRECTED BY MAX ELTON

ABOUT THE PLAY

Male Nude. Female Gaze.

Ollie is a self-proclaimed Beta Male. He's into ultimate frisbee, vegan barbecues and playing the Hamilton soundtrack on repeat.

When he volunteers to model nude for an artist, he's hell bent on showing her just how woke he is.

Lola doesn't care if Ollie is a nice guy or not - she just wants to draw him. When he won't let her get on with it, she decides to teach him a lesson.

Soon, Ollie starts asking if he can have his clothes back but Lola is far from finished.

Stripped is a tense comic drama that asks whether those "nice guys" are really all that they seem.

PRESS RESPONSES

A Younger Theatre

Olivia Lunn

★★★★★

A play about bodies, and the minds that sculpt them, *Stripped* gradually peels away the layers of hypocritical gloss that shroud the politics of gender. Ollie poses as Lola's life model: whilst they both pretend to be strangers from the outset, we come to realise the lasting implications of an evening they once shared.

Charles Reston, as Ollie, and Antonia Kinlay, as Lola, tentatively enter the stage as actors, who seem to be consciously performing ulterior versions of themselves. Writer Hew Rous-Eyre builds their dialogue out of stereotypes, as their respective opinions are gendered, and then polarised. Lola appears to be the nonchalant, self-assured feminist, whilst Ollie is the nauseatingly woke "beta" male, chronically lacking in self-awareness. To begin with, their characters are hilariously armed with unconvincing millennial sarcasm, pointing to our necessary reliance (as writers, actors, directors, audience members, and citizens in a sexist society) on stereotype, as a means of navigating the treacherous realm of the #MeToo movement. Yet this thin veneer of cliché decomposes slowly and beautifully, as the narrative is literally stripped away. Layers give way to layers,

and various complexities rise and pop like soapy bubbles, leaving a provocative sting rather than a tangible conclusion.

Ollie not only commandeers Lola's body through rape, but his process of fictionalisation re-writes her trauma into his fairy tale. Her body becomes a text intended to temper his loneliness and fuel romantic fantasy, posing questions about the ethical consequences of bending people into fiction. There is a hardness to Lola, an inward-looking fear, a reactionary resistance to being read. I feel as though she plays to the idea of existing as a woman who has been sculpted by a man, thereby tracking the lasting consequences of rape. Just as Ollie and Lola seek to situate themselves within their own colliding narratives, we are forced to declare our own allegiance. In the same vein as Park Chan-Wook's film 'The Handmaiden', the plot-twist threads together a seemingly bottomless conversation. As members of the audience, we are chucked into indeterminate waters.

Director Max Elton ensures that *Stripped* is indeed stripped-back. It is a play that shuns excess. Words are unfolded by wit, each thought picked up, turned around, and thrown back into the mix. There are no spare parts. Ollie's Che Guevara poster, for example, not only validates Lola's version of events by proving some sort of memory – it also embeds this notion of multi-faceted interpretability into the fabric of the play.

The play is sustained by a conversation. One that stops meandering about half an hour in, instead giving way to a pervasive interrogation. Lola's studio space is littered with books by John Berger and Kate Tempest, yet it manages to adopt the atmosphere of a courtroom, muddling the boundary between the political and aesthetic impulses that underlie any work of art.

Ollie says it was romance whilst Lola says it was a rape. And the play asks us whether there is a distinction between these two narratives. We are made to question the frames we give to an event that is remembered, mis-remembered, or not at all remembered. Rape exists outside of memory, and outside of story-telling. And that is precisely why *Stripped* lingers awhile in the mind. It is a play that revolves around a paradoxical aim, attempting to grasp some sort of humanity that is wilfully placed outside of the theatrical realm.

Broadway World
Jonathan Marshall

★★★★

According to their website, "Bitter Pill believes the only way to tackle any subject is to first entertain in order to engage. Our work with never seek to lecture unless it has first made people laugh." They've certainly achieved their objective with their latest effort, *Stripped*. Written by Hew Rous-Eyre and directed by his co-founder Max Elton, we are offered a fresh perspective on an important and timely issue.

Ollie (Charles Reston) has offered to pose nude for artist Lola (Antonia Kinlay). Cue many laugh-out-loud moments as Ollie awkwardly goes about undressing and, once fully nude, recoils as Lola switches on a portable heater.

But Lola isn't just interested in drawing Ollie. In fact, her intentions are to draw things out for him in black and white. As we learn that the two actually know one another, dark events from a drunken sexual encounter in their past are revealed to us but with two contrasting perspectives - two very different pictures are painted.

We open to find Ollie standing nervously across from a seemingly more confident Lola, in a small art studio. As detailed and realistic as Filipe Miranda's brilliant set is, our eyes are of course drawn to these two as they radiate nervous energy. This level of immediacy prevails throughout, with the tempo shifting up and down and the initial lighter moments soon darkening.

From capturing the early apprehension of Ollie and his nervous verbal ramblings in response to Lola's to-the-point instructions, to the final showdown where he allows wonderful moments of silence to do all the talking, Rous-Eyre demonstrates masterful naturalistic dialogue. The script is brutally honest, as it should be, but there are also instances of character-driven humour that make for a good laugh.

A strong script needs strong actors, and Reston and Kinlay more than step up to the plate with the two complementing one another on stage very well.

Reston succeeds in portraying the nice, charming guy. He projects the nerves of someone undressing in front of another with the slight tremble of his hand and the avoidance of eye contact. His awkwardness at folding away even his underwear and adopting each pose is quite endearing.

When the truth is revealed, we of course look at this character in a different way, yet still the emotions he experiences - ranging from anger and frustration to quiet panic and guilt - prevent Ollie from ever morphing into the two-dimensional villain of the piece. It's a multi-layered and engaging performance.

Kinlay, just as her character does, commands the stage throughout. She starts with confident control. This is her space and she uses it, circling Ollie like a shark without ever getting too close. Even during her quirky putdowns and pithy remarks, though, Kinlay manages to display an air of unease. Her subtle facial expressions and mannerisms speak volumes.

As Lola's anger builds, Kinlay opts to stick largely with these subtleties. The result is a carefully constructed, highly believable and poignant performance which lingers in the mind as you exit the theatre.

What is also of note is that both characters are afforded equal time to fight their own corner. It's refreshing not to cast sole focus on the victim, but to actually concentrate on the perpetrator as well, and bringing them together in such an

intimate setting with all on show and nowhere to hide makes it all the more enthralling to watch.

It's more than apparent that writer and director are very much on the same page here. Elton directs sensitively, knowing when silence should be allowed to prevail and extracting such a vast array of emotions from his actors whilst avoiding anything remotely near the realms of stereotype or cliché. It deserves a bigger stage, not least because of the topic the play explores, but also because of the sheer quality exhibited in all aspects of the production.

What makes the play work is the lack of melodrama. There could have been loud, angry arguments with the smashing of furniture to convey the upset, fear, panic and humiliation that our characters feel, but sometimes a whisper can be louder than a scream. *Stripped* stimulates our thoughts and opens up a discussion - surely two of the main reasons we choose to go to the theatre.

Everything Theatre
Marianna Meloni

★★★★

Ollie (Charles Reston) is a nice guy, a bit submissive, a bit insecure. Lola (Antonia Kinlay) is a confident portrait artist who doesn't like to be told what to do. When she posts an advert on Facebook looking for nude models, Ollie, determined to come out of his shell, decides to apply.

We first see them together in Lola's elaborately furnished studio. She's explaining what the job entails and he's so eager to please that he unwittingly keeps saying all the wrong things. He's tender whilst she's coarse, making us feel for his awkward behaviour. At this point, there's no way to foresee the direction their conversation is about to take.

As he strips for the session, his vulnerability is exposed. A couple of nervous jokes about his physical features are quickly shut down by the artist, visibly annoyed by his verbal diarrhoea. She tries to get on with her work, whilst his conversation goes in circles, insisting on his Beta Male status. Supposedly, he wants to make her feel more comfortable. In reality, he's the one looking for reassurance.

As the conversation unfolds, under a stark, unchanging lighting, we discover the pair met previously eight years ago at a mutual friend's party. He seems to remember every moment of that night, whereas she claims to have no recollection of it - or, perhaps, she just doesn't want to.

Sharp lines chase each other in quick repartee, whilst we're gradually let into the chilling details of what initially seems an endearing encounter. The development is so startling that even the heckler on the first row, who loudly chuckled throughout the first fifteen minutes, is finally, definitively, silenced.

Both actors offer a superb embodiment of relatable situations. The tears and shivering we see on stage are so real that we can feel delusion and regret sipping through those painful memories. As bare and defenceless as Ollie looks, we're compelled to empathise with his mistakes, almost taking pity on his clumsy lack of judgement. Yet, just when we're about to do so, he once again lets us down, reconfirming what a coward he can be when pushed by circumstances.

Eventually, Lola finds closure, while Ollie is left burning with shame in a tense fifty-minute two-hander that leaves us unsettled while serving up plenty of food for thought. When the lights go up, not only do we want, but we feel the urge to talk about it, unable to make up our minds. We feel we should discuss further the concept of consent, whether it is ever open for interpretation, and if we can ever find nuances to it. The answer is obvious and yet Ollie is such a nice guy that we really can't believe what he did.

The Spy in the Stalls

Joseph Prestwich

★★★★

A surprising and thought-provoking piece of drama, 'Stripped' takes a tantalising premise and turns expectations on their head. What starts as a bouncy two-hander slowly transforms into a nuanced and devastating account of the how two people can view one night so differently.

Ollie (Charles Reston) has agreed to pose nude for artist Lola (Antonia Kinlay). Arriving at her studio, it's an initially – and expectedly – awkward and amusing situation. After undressing, Ollie takes up various poses to the rhythm of Lola's egg-timer. Her dead-pan wit battles Ollie's incessant talking, who delivers imposing judgements and provocations that Lola easily bats aside. "All art is inherently political," he blurts out at one point. "Cute. I remember my first opinion!" is Lola's sarcastic response.

So far, so flirtatious. Things take a turn for the sinister as Ollie reveals he knows Lola. Eight years previously, he recalls a night Lola claims, at first, not to remember. Drunken party, 'Dead Celebrity' fancy dress theme, stumbling home together and dancing on park benches. After drawing out Ollie's version of the night, Lola unveils her big reveal. Not only does she remember the night in detail, its haunted her for years. They didn't just "have sex", Ollie raped her. And it's time he makes amends.

Victims confronting their attacker is not entirely new, nor is it a course of action to be recommended. As authors Thordis Elva and Tom Stranger have proved, conversations between victim and perpetrator can be educational and enlightening, revealing new aspects of our understanding of the culture surrounding rape. Hew Rous-Eyre's 'Stripped' is a vital and timely addition to the discussion. Neither victim nor perpetrator is wholly good or bad – they're just real people in all their complexity. Rous-Eyre's hour-long piece works alongside such tomes as Mithu Sanyal's 'Rape: From Lucretia to #metoo' as questioning how we

understand rape culture. It's also a thoroughly entertaining and gaspingly funny piece of theatre.

Kinlay and Reston work exceptionally well together, with the former shining as she moves from dead-pan charm to emotionally vulnerable over the course of the encounter. Reston seems a little less comfortable on stage, but offers a brave performance, especially considering he's nude about 90% of the time. Max Elton has directed the two well to avoid melodrama, but the piece does lag a little after the 'big reveal' and Reston's response to being confronted seems a little unsure. Felipe Miranda's set design is deceptively simple and conjures a detailed artist's studio superbly well. Elle McAlpine is credited as being the production's 'intimacy coordinator', a role I was pleased to see listed.

Overall, 'Stripped' is a nuanced, thought-provoking piece of drama that will stimulate discussion long after the final bows. Cunningly avoiding a 'taking-sides' approach to stories of sexual assault, it gives a fresh perspective on a difficult issue, whilst still managing to be a witty and engrossing piece of theatre.

Camden New Journal **Calum Fraser**

Stripped is a sharp and witty play that hits you with a flurry of talking points. Young and eager-to-impress Ollie (Charles Reston) has come to pose naked for stony-faced artist Lola (Antonia Kinlay). This set-up is low-hanging fruit for easy laughs, which the script easily hoovers up.

But the light-hearted opening prepares the ground for the darker scenes later in the play as it becomes apparent that Ollie and Lola have history. Without spoiling the plot entirely, it is safe to say this two-hander tackles some of the issues thrown up by the #MeToo movement.

After the scandal broke around movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, hundreds of thousands of women talked about their experiences of sexual harassment and assault under the #MeToo social media banner.

Stripped explores the messy nature of any post-mortem into an assault. The artist's studio becomes a private sphere courtroom as we piece together the truth.

Kinlay gives the guarded and fierce Lola a sense of empowerment, while Reston skilfully captures the essence of a "self-proclaimed beta male" – hiding behind false claims of humility while constantly trying to puff up his ego.

The play strips modern masculinity back to reveal that the "woke metropolitan man" is no different from his predecessors.

The stage is simple while director Max Elton's light touch allows the power of the script to be brought forward.

This one-hour play is an excellent piece of fringe theatre and it wouldn't be surprising to see Stripped come back again in a longer form on the West End.