

'SHAKERS' EDUCATIONAL NOTES



East Riding Theatre, April-May 2017

By Jane Thornton and John Godber

Directed by John Godber

Educational Notes: Shakers re-write 2017

Synopsis

The play is presented by four waitresses, each under pressure in different ways, and describes a typical night at a bar called Shakers. The play is set in 1985, which is the year it was written, and specifically deals with issues of the time, most notably high unemployment. The actresses play all the characters in the bar, including the clientele the four waitresses have to deal with.

Style

The play was originally performed by Hull Truck Theatre Company and was written as a sister piece to *Bouncers*, which went on to be one of the most successful plays of all time. The actresses are called upon to play a large number of different characters, they have to be amusing, sensitive and real, whilst using no extra props and relying on their physical skills, and mime. This style became well known because of the success of *Bouncers*, and a number of actresses approached John and Jane to ask them to write something equally as challenging for them. In the original production Jane and John wrote exactly half of the play each. This style is also very economical. This is certainly something to be considered, especially in the current theatrical climate, when funding is continually being reduced and small theatre companies struggle to survive. It may also be one of the reasons why the play continues to be so popular, another being that there are very few plays which offer actresses the chance to be so physical and play the opposite sex.

Main characters

The four main characters are Adele, Mel, Carol and Nicky. They vary from being happy to be working in Shakers, to despising their job and desperate to get out. The major unseen character is Mario, who owns the bar, and who is threatening the girls with a change to their working conditions by insisting that they wear shorts to help boost custom. Carol is against this, as she realises this type of sexual exploitation is unacceptable. Adele however, is desperate to keep her job, since she is a single mother with a small child, and so is more than happy to do whatever Mario asks of her. Nicky has just secured a job dancing on a cruise ship, which involves some topless dancing, so the shorts issue does not affect her, but is uneasy about following her dream of dancing. Only Mel appears happy with her status in the bar, since this is the best of a number of low level jobs that she has endured. There is also great tension between Mel

and Adele, since Mel has had the experience of aborting an unwanted child when she was a teenager, and this has left her scarred, and resentful of Adele's young daughter Emma, and the relationship they have.

Influences

The influences on *Shakers* clearly come from *Bouncers* and *Up 'n' Under* by John Godber, which won Comedy of the Year in 1984, and also from the early work of Steven Berkoff. Godber is a fan of Berkoff and liked the physical, actor-centred nature of his work. Godber was also a research scholar at Leeds University for five years and was heavily influenced by Professor Michael Patterson; the world theatre expert and German Theatre scholar. Much of the influence on *Shakers* came from the early plays of Bertolt Brecht.

In order to develop the characters workshop ideas might investigate the style of the clients who visit the bar and the back story and history of the girls who work as waitresses in *Shakers*. Great attention to detail is required since everything is boiled down to pure essentials.

Context

Although set in 1985 the themes in the play are still extremely relevant today. Only recently the Government refused to back a law which would prevent clothing regulations for women at work. Failure to back this proposal means women will continue to be able to be forced to wear high heels and skirts to work: making them conform to a gender stereotype that can often also be seen as sexualised.

Margaret Thatcher the first British female Prime Minister came to power in 1979 and led the Conservative party until 1990.

Design.

The design is simply a framework for the actresses to work in. This design by Graham Kirk is especially clever since it creates a sense of place with the simplest of suggestions. Godber and Kirk have worked together for over twenty years. This long standing relationship creates a mutual understanding between director and designer

To hear John to talk about this production click on the link below:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p051qzf4>

Drama exercise that can help with this style:

1. Find a space. Have each person mime having a cup of tea. Do the exercise again and make it five times bigger. Do it again and make it ten times bigger, then twenty times bigger. Think about heavy the cup will become and how big your mouth will be etc. Cut the exercise down to five movements that the students assume on five counts. Add a noise to each movement. The exercise should take on a dance- like quality. This exercise should be able to help you reduce each character's physical traits to the bare essentials and encourage precision of movement.
2. Hot seat your characters, even the smaller parts, you will find things you can use. All characters need to have a journey. Where have they come from? Where are they going to? What is their energy? All these things dictate their behaviour.
3. Improvise the lives of the characters outside the bar.
4. Have one person as the leader with the others behind and try moving in unison. Simple moves like lifting an arm or turning can be very effective.
5. Tel the story in 12 Freeze frames then try cutting it down to six.
6. Create "mood boards" for 1985.