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A harrowing bedsit classic brought vividly to life

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Charles Spencer reviews *Woyzeck* at the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill

Woyzeck, the final play in the slim collected works of Georg Büchner (1813-1837), has had an enduring influence out of all proportion to its length and initial impact. It runs to a mere 25 pages, and it had to wait until 1913 for its first performance, almost eight decades after its brilliant young German author died from typhus at the age of 23.

Yet I can think of no play that has had a greater impact on today's young dramatists. Sarah Kane was obsessed with it, and I'd guess that at least half the first plays I have seen over the past decade have owed something, somewhere, to *Woyzeck*.

It remains almost spookily modern. The play consists of a series of fragmentary scenes (the dramatist died before he had completed his definitive version) and the text has more in common with an expressionist film script than a well-made 19th-century play. In distinctly contemporary fashion, *Woyzeck* combines bitter tragedy with grotesque black comedy as it rages over the world's injustice.

It is a great play, if one that appeals particularly to depressed and earnest students holed up in grimy bedsits with only jammy dodgers, baked beans and records by the Smiths to keep them going as they struggle to make sense of life and write a play of their own.

Daniel Kramer, who has both adapted and directs this production, substitutes the music of Elvis Presley for the folk songs Büchner included in his original. The King's renditions of *Blue Moon*, *Misery* and *All Shook Up* accompany the story of *Woyzeck*, our humble foot-soldier hero, as he attempts to survive and earn a crust for his girlfriend and baby even though his mind is clouded by psychosis. And when his beloved Marie proves unfaithful to him, the voices in his head drive him to murder and suicide.

This is a continuously inventive, powerfully acted production that does full justice to Büchner's vivid and conflicting moods. Just occasionally it seems merely silly, but more often it reveals a director with a touch of the magician about him. The atmospheric evocation of a sleazy fairground freak-show, the brilliantly choreographed fight between *Woyzeck* and his rival, the Drum Major, and the dazzling sequence in which an army captain takes his ease while the poor bloody workers do their laundry, all attest to a director of extraordinary flair. And then Kramer tops it all with not one but two dazzling coups de théâtre at the end.

But there is depth as well as visual bravura. Edward Hogg gives us an unforgettably anguished *Woyzeck*, so gentle and haunted at the start, so raving and dangerous at the end. Fred Pearson and Tony Guilfoyle offer vicious caricatures of the officer class, Josh Cole is a creepy showman while Myriam Acharki brings a vulnerable beauty to the heroine.

This is a harrowing, unforgettable production, though as Morrissey once sang, *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*.