

Life & Times Theatre

Death of England

Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, London, 31 January 2020 to 7 February 2020

TIME AND PLACE, TIME AND PLACE

That's what Michael's father used to tell him about racism — keep it under your hat son when you're working on the flower stall, but let it out on the street and in the stands at Leyton Orient. Time and place. Michael starts off joshing with the audience, dispensing banter and biscuits, a lovable Jack the lad, but pretty soon, coked up and full of vodka, he is struggling to put on his shirt and tie for his father's funeral. And we're off.

For 100 minutes Rafe Spall's Michael Fletcher careers through a white-knuckle ride of a monologue, a real theatrical tour de force. This engrossing play by Clint Dyer and Roy Williams probes the complex interactions between family, racism, class, nationalism, Brexit, more racism, and, critically, football, as Michael begins to get to grips with what he knew and didn't know about his father, his family, and himself. Racist bigotry, anger, and a tendency to violence were firmly woven into the Fletcher DNA. Michael's relationships

with his parents were uneasy, to say the least.

Michael's father loved Leyton Orient. He died in the pub, leaning against Michael who thought he'd gone to sleep, watching England lose to Croatia in the semi-final of the 2018 World Cup. The symbolism is heavy — death of a father, death of national pride, the Death of England.

The Leave campaign was in full swing and, as one of the articles in the programme notes, the recent spate of racist incidents probably resulted from the taboo on racism being diluted by its anti-immigration, nationalistic rhetoric.

Bananas thump down onto the stage to make the point — amplified by the set design, in which the cruciform stage becomes, among other things, the cross of St George.

And yet ... Fletcher senior had a secret, which Michael stumbles across two-thirds of the way through the play, revealed by someone Michael cannot conceive of his father having anything to do with. It's too much of a spoiler to say more, except that it was completely unexpected, slightly implausible, and thought provoking.

There were one or two other moments of implausibility, the occasional false note, but far more passages of authenticity, great poignancy, and high humour. Rafe Spall's bravura acting carried all before it.

Spall received a standing ovation at the Dorfman, and rightly. He throws himself into the role, body and soul, and despite all the bile and



Rafe Spall as Michael in *Death of England* by Clint Dyer and Roy Williams. Picture credit: Helen Murray.

recrimination, the play ends on an almost good-natured, conciliatory note, as Michael carefully arranges various artefacts, which he had used as props, into a strange tableau in the centre of the stage — beer glasses, crematorium ashes, buckets of flowers.

Perhaps that's right. Perhaps we'll eventually pull ourselves out of the bad place we're in at present, and recognise that the future depends on respect, acceptance, and compassion.

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Rafe Spall as Michael in *Death of England* by Clint Dyer and Roy Williams. Picture credit: Helen Murray.



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