

Review: Room at Stratford East

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Survival mode: B. L. Sherrington reviews the stage adaptation of Emma Donoghue's novel.

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Room at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Photo: Scott Rylander.

The strength of a mother's love in Emma Donoghue's book-turned-film-turned-play speaks volumes. Ma (Witney White) transforms her prison of a make-shift dungeon into a fairy tale for her five-year-old son (Harrison

Wilding). Jack believes 'Room', as he calls it, is perfect. Everything has a place, everything has a purpose.

The play opens with video designer Andrzej Goulding's projected scene of a room as if the audience are a part of a sadistic version of *The Truman Show*. With chalk drawings of domestic items including a dog and a lamp, set designer Lily Arnold presents an infant-eye version of the world. At first glance it seems like a sweet set up – Ma is on the bed relaxing while Jack is building something. This domestic veneer is disrupted when the pair begins dancing like robots. There's desperation to their movements, as if all this is a method of survival.

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It gradually becomes clear how far Ma has gone to protect Jack from their reality. She tells him he was a gift from heaven sent to her because she was lonely; tells him the stories of Alice in Wonderland; tells him the people on the television are make-believe. Anytime he comes close to discovering the truth she

breastfeeds him. As an outsider looking in, it is a warped scenario, but to Jack this normal because it is all he knows.

It is after Jack goes to sleep in a wardrobe that Donoghue's play takes a sinister turn and we meet Ma's biggest fear, Old Nick (Liam McKenna). Arnold's rotating set design show both what Ma endures as Old Nick forces himself on her and that Jack can hear it in his bed, as the springs of Ma's bed contract repeatedly. The child's confusion and thoughts are relayed with his inner voice spoken by Fela Lufadeju as Big Jack.

The final escape attempt reveals how desperate Ma has become after seven years of verbal, physical and sexual abuse. All she has to keep her going from one day to the next is the love for her son, despite the knowledge of how he was conceived. Once they are free, Jack is the one in turmoil.

Having never left Room before is utterly confused by the outside world. He can't cope with stairs, weather, conversing with anyone other than Ma, and at first believes there is no world outside of Room. At this moment it is questionable whether he will ever adapt to the outside world, and also how it will treat him.

The performances from White, Wilding, McKenna and Lufadeju are superb. Wilding and Lufadeju work together with notable skill to portray Jack's innocence, and convey his inner turmoil to the audience. White goes above and beyond as a woman caught between the love for her child and the fear for the safety of her own life. McKenna as Old Nick instantly creates fear via the slightest movement, even when just walking slowly across the stage.

Cora Bissett and Kathryn Joseph's lyrics are also perceptive in their ability to emphasise the mayhem of the situation. At first glance *Room* appears to be a story solely about Ma escaping, but it is also about the characters adapting to what freedom really is. The mental strain of coming to terms with the failures and pressures of the real world remains somewhat underexplored here. However, the production succeeds in showing the resolute resourcefulness of people striving to survive.

Room is on at Theatre Royal Stratford East until 3rd June 2017. Click [here](#) for more details.

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