

## Review: The Listening Room at the Old Red Lion

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*The victims and perpetrators of violent crime: B. L. Sherrington reviews Brave Badger's new verbatim play.*

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The Listening Room at the Old Red Lion. Photo: Nomad Creative Studio

One act of violence, and five people must cope with the extremities of grief. Harriet Madeley's *The Listening Room* is about recapturing of the events following one tragic evening. Five audience members are asked to randomly assign the envelopes on their seats to the five actors on stage. The envelopes represent a different person. The cast then deliver the words taken from the recording of Madeley's original interviews via headphones.

When we meet Ray and Vi (Charmaine Wombwell & Kathryn Worth), they seem like a pair of childhood sweethearts you'd find around Dalston. Yet when they start discussing their son's death, it's unclear how at ease they really are. Jacob (Tony Hasnath), meanwhile, is a nervous boy. With no paternal role model, he was the head of the family from a young age. He helped his friends when they were involved in a fight, punching a stranger which eventually killed him. Jacob is consumed with rage and guilt at the same time. Yet he isn't portrayed as obviously angry, which supports the theory that the expression of rage isn't uniform.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Tim (Bruce Panday), was another victim of this fight and was hit by Khamran (Mark Knightley) with a baseball bat. Khamran is every inch the stereotype of a young convict. He's a recluse, doesn't like to be told what to do and has an aspect of self hatred. He admits he isn't fond of religion or being Asian.

Perhaps when he sees Tim he is threatened by the confidence the other boy has in his own skin. The men admit to going on a boys' night out, complete with cocaine and ecstasy, almost as if they're giving excuses in a 'boys will be boys' manner.

Madeley's technique for having us meet the characters as we do provides subtle clues to explaining their part in the incident. Khamran has a history of violence, stabbing his ex-girlfriend, whilst Jacob was at heart a good teenager, wanting to help his friends.

Under Max Barton's direction, *The Listening Room* focuses on the issues surrounding the victims and perpetrators of violent crime. The experience of the British justice system and plea bargaining are at the heart of this. For example, the gang culture in the prison system supports the need for rehabilitation not excessive punishment. "You go in for stealing one bike and come out knowing out how to steal 100 bikes," Ray comments.

The play ends 11 years later with the characters not quite accepting "what's done is done", but in shared acknowledgement that the loss has defined their lives for better or worse. This emotional transition through grief is represented by the addition of paint to a wall, yet this conceit feels unnecessary in an already involving play.

The performers are all dressed in identical clothing. This uniformed costume design suggests that despite being on opposite sides of the criminal spectrum, they're all really in the same situation. In the small space of the Old Red Lion, their emotions drip through into the atmosphere. Watching it, you become almost a part of, and at peace with, the grief.

*The Listening Room* is on until 4th March 2017 at Old Red Lion Theatre. [Click here](#) for more details.

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