

## **The Red Lion by Patrick Marber**

When writing for me became more than a hobby I was given two sage pieces of advice. Firstly, write about something you have a passion about and secondly, write about something you have personal experience of. Of course there is also a third reason which is you are simply a natural storyteller. The writers of our generation, whose work will not fade with time, are those who tick all three boxes.

So a play written around the life behind the scenes of a football club could be said to be quite niche. Base that club in the nitty, gritty world of Non-League football and potentially the audience is restricted to those hardy souls who stand alone on crumbling terraces clutching their carrier bags and sipping luke-warm tea whilst brickies, cabbies and self-employed plasterers hoof the ball and kick lumps out of each other. But that's where you'd be wrong. Non-League football is a representation of the real heart of this beautiful land, as play-write Patrick Marber delivers his new production at The National Theatre, *The Red Lion*.

Marber knows a thing or two about this murky world. Behind the glitz and glamour of *Closer* and *Notes to a Scandal* he has been moonlighting as a Director of a Non-League club for a number of years, volunteering his time to travel on a rollercoaster ride of emotion, pain and pleasure that the game at the grassroots brings. There are no WAGS, no Porsches in the car park and no private jets. Life down here is about rolling your sleeves up, mucking in and not expecting to receive a thank you for doing so. For three years he became invested in the running of a club in the seven tier of English football, so saw for himself, warts and all, what life was really like in the bowels of the beautiful game. His observations, experiences and perceptions form the backdrop to this production.

*The Red Lion* embodies the emotions of a typical Non-League football club. Completely set in the dressing room of a teaming the gutter but looking at the stars, the story takes us on a journey of discovery for three characters. Jimmy the club's manager, superbly played by Daniel Mays (whose credits include *the Bank Job*, *Made in Dagenham* and *Ashes to Ashes*), former player, manager, groundsman, club legend now kitman Yates, played by Peter Wight (*Hot Fuzz*, *Babel* and *Atonement*) and newly discovered wonderkid Jordan, played by relative newcomer Calvin Demba.

The story is a mixture of hope, amusing interactions and disappointment, taking the audience on a journey that plays out over three scenes, set apart by a few weeks in the lives of the three characters, each of whom experiences the highs and despairing lows of the game and life can bring. The integrity of the audience is certainly put to the test by the plot, leaving you with the question "what would I do?" in a similar situation. Whilst it is set in the world of football, this is a play about ethics, human kindness and despair when life gets in the way.

Each of the characters is driven to extreme actions all to satisfy their perception of what life owes them, ranging from Jimmy's marital situation and need for cash to stay afloat, Yates's steadfast view of doing the right thing to young Jordan's stubbornness to be treated fairly

and given a chance in spite of what card life has dealt him. The culmination of the three egos, each with their own agendas makes for a very powerful and all too real final act.

From someone who has a bit of an involvement in this world I can say the attention to detail is amazing - whether it be the set design and props, the opinions and thoughts of the characters in relation to the world we operate in or the actual scenarios that play out. We will all recognise some if not all of the make-up of the characters. Whether you are a football fan or not, this is a play to make us all think about our core values and beliefs as well as adding a level of clever humour to a subject that often takes itself far too seriously and self-important.

Marber once again proves with this production his versatile writing hand but also underlines the fact he is one of those writers of our generation that can deliver emotion by the bucket-load. Mays, Young and xxx play the roles superbly and deliver deep, complex performances that go deeper than the script into the mannerisms, quirks and thoughts of the characters in the two hour performance.

The Red Lion opens at The National Theatre on 11th June and is booking until 30<sup>th</sup> September.