



Theater

Pornography at Steep Theatre Company | Theater review

Simon Stephens obliquely takes on the July 2005 suicide bombings in the London Underground in this collection of vignettes, given an outstandingly compassionate staging at Steep.

By Kris Vire



Peter Moore and Michael Salinas in *Pornography* at Steep Theatre Company Photo: Lee Miller

Steep Theatre Company. By Simon Stephens. Dir. Robin Witt. With ensemble cast. 1hr 35mins; no intermission.

July 29, 2011

Set in the U.K.'s momentous first week of July 2005—a week that spanned the G8 summit in Scotland, the Live 8 concerts centered in Hyde Park and the announcement that London would host the 2012 Summer Olympics, and ended with the July 7 suicide bombings in the London Underground—Simon Stephens's *Pornography* comprises six vignettes. The pieces—four monologues and a pair of duets—depict ordinary Brits in everyday turmoil: a schoolboy nursing both racist leanings and a dangerous crush on a teacher; a divorced and lonely academic reuniting uncomfortably with a former student; a widow whose newfound viewing habits give the play its title; a fictionalized version of one of the British-native Underground bombers.

What's perhaps most provocative about the latter is that his is far from the most provocative scene. The bomber, played by John Taflan with a steady hand, takes us along on the morning of his final feat, calmly describing his actions and, as Stephens imagines them, his motivations. While the playwright doesn't exactly justify the man's deeds, Taflan's character comes off as no more or less damaged by this world's cruelties and injustices than Rudy Galvan's disturbed schoolboy, or the tortured sibling relationship between Caroline Neff and Walter Briggs.

In a clean, unadorned staging—designer Chelsea M. Warren confines each scene's action to one of six white platforms—director Robin Witt and a marvelous ensemble capture the joys, terrors and banalities of this modern moment. Five flat-screens above display Mike Tutaj's exceptionally haunting video design; the actors stare up at the screens in moments of transition in the way we stay glued to the TV in times of shared tragedy, as if looking for guidance. It's hard to define Stephens's brand of compelling compassion, but it's like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of pornography: You know it when you see it.

Five Star Review: Vire, K. (2011, July 29). *Pornography* at Steep Theatre Company | Theater review: Simon Stephens obliquely takes on the July 2005 suicide bombings in the London Underground in this collection of vignettes, given an outstandingly compassionate staging at Steep. *TimeOut Chicago*. Retrieved July 30, 2012, from <http://timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/theater/14876067/pornography-at-steep-theatre-company-theater-review>