

THEATRE REVIEW: *BAD BLOOD – 20 YEARS LATER*

Written & Directed by Bernie Winston - The Studio Beyond, Liverpool

A Story of Friendship, Fear and Finding the Laughter in Life's Darkest Moments.

There are certain subjects in life that are never easy to talk about, let alone bring to the stage. Illness, mortality and the terrifying uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring are hardly the obvious ingredients for an evening of theatrical entertainment. Yet, in *Bad Blood – 20 Years Later*, writer and director Bernie Winston tackles these difficult themes with warmth, sensitivity and, perhaps most importantly, a wonderfully refreshing sense of humour.

Performed at Liverpool's intimate Studio Beyond, this sequel to Winston's award-winning original play *Bad Blood* takes audiences back into the lives of characters whose friendships have already weathered one of life's greatest storms. Twenty years ago, Matt faced a battle with leukaemia, ultimately surviving thanks to a life-saving bone marrow transplant from his father. Now, two decades later, the possibility that the disease may have returned threatens to turn his world upside down once again.

But this is not simply a play about cancer. At its heart, it is a story about friendship, loyalty, resilience and those wonderful people in our lives who refuse to leave our side when things get difficult.

And thankfully, it is also a reminder that even when life deals us its cruellest hand, there is often still room for a good laugh.



At the emotional centre of the production is Mike San as Matt, delivering a performance that demands both sensitivity and considerable emotional range. As a man who has already survived one battle with leukaemia and now faces the terrifying possibility of its return, Matt is a character who could easily become overwhelmed by the seriousness of his circumstances. However, San's portrayal allows us to see the person behind the illness, making Matt feel human, relatable and wonderfully authentic.

What makes San's performance particularly compelling is his ability to balance the emotional weight of the story with the lighter moments that Winston has carefully woven into the script. There is an important distinction between playing someone who is frightened and allowing that fear to define the entire character, and San's interpretation gives Matt the personality and humanity needed to make his journey resonate.

His portrayal captures the vulnerability of a man facing an uncertain future, while still allowing glimpses of the humour, determination and everyday frustrations that make the character so believable.

It is a demanding central role, and San provides the emotional anchor around which the rest of the production revolves. His interactions with Eddie and Nicki are especially important, giving the audience an insight into the relationships that have sustained Matt over the years.

Ultimately, it is the humanity of San's performance that makes Matt's predicament so affecting. We are not simply watching a character confront the possibility of illness; we are watching an ordinary man attempt to come to terms with an extraordinary fear.



Paul Carroll brings a welcome warmth and humour to the role of Eddie, Matt's loyal friend and one of the key figures in his support network.

Eddie is the sort of character who demonstrates that friendship does not always come wrapped in carefully chosen words of wisdom. Sometimes the greatest comfort comes from a familiar face, a ridiculous comment or someone who knows exactly how to make you laugh when you least feel like it.

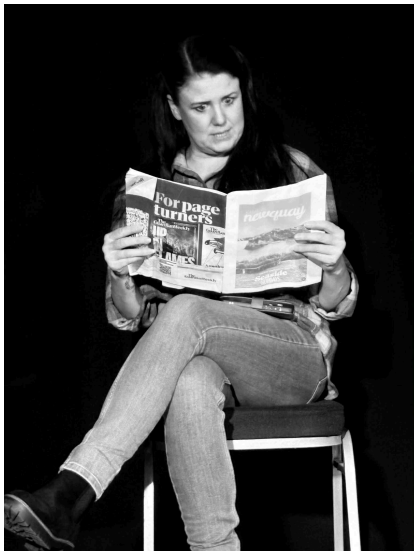
Carroll has a role that offers plenty of opportunity to explore this balance, and his performance brings an important sense of lightness to the production without losing sight of the seriousness of the story.

There is a real skill in delivering comedy within a drama dealing with such sensitive subject matter. The humour must feel natural rather than forced, and Eddie's character provides the perfect opportunity for those moments of welcome relief.

Carroll's portrayal also allows the audience to appreciate the deeper emotional importance of Eddie's friendship with Matt. Beneath the jokes and the everyday banter lies a genuine sense of loyalty, and it is this combination of humour and affection that makes the character so appealing.

His interactions with San are central to the production's exploration of male friendship, particularly the way men can sometimes use humour to communicate feelings that they struggle to express directly.

Eddie could easily have become simply the comic relief, but the character has a much more meaningful purpose within the story, and Carroll's performance gives him the warmth and personality needed to fulfil it.



Kate Harcus brings warmth, sensitivity and an engaging emotional depth to the role of Nicki, providing another vital part of the friendship that sits at the heart of *Bad Blood – 20 Years Later*.

Nicki is an important character because she allows the audience to experience Matt's situation from another perspective. While Matt must confront his own fears, those closest to him are also forced to navigate the uncertainty of what may lie ahead. Harcus brings a valuable emotional dimension to the central trio, portraying a woman who is determined to remain strong for her friend while dealing with the complicated emotions that come with watching someone you care about face such a frightening possibility.

However, Nicki has something rather significant happening in her own life. Amidst all the uncertainty surrounding Matt's health, she discovers that she is pregnant. It is a revelation that adds a fascinating and rather poignant new dimension to the story. While Matt is facing the terrifying possibility of his illness returning, Nicki finds herself at the beginning of an entirely new chapter, preparing to bring a new life into the world.

There is something beautifully bittersweet about this contrast. At a time when one friend is questioning what the future may hold, another is suddenly faced with a future full of possibilities, responsibilities and inevitable changes. It is a clever piece of storytelling from Winston, reminding us that life rarely has the courtesy to deal with one major event at a time.

For Harcus, this development gives Nicki an additional emotional complexity. Her character must balance the excitement, uncertainty and perhaps even anxiety surrounding her pregnancy with her concern for Matt. There is also the delicate question of how to celebrate something so wonderful when someone close to you is facing potentially devastating news.

Harcus's portrayal gives Nicki a lovely sense of humanity, allowing her to be more than simply the supportive friend. She is a woman with her own hopes, fears and life-changing circumstances, and that makes her place within the story all the more meaningful.

Her interactions with Mike San and Paul Carroll are essential in establishing the bond between the three friends, and she brings an important warmth and sincerity to the group dynamic. Nicki's pregnancy also reinforces one of the play's most touching underlying messages: even during our darkest moments, life continues, bringing with it unexpected changes, new beginnings and reasons to remain hopeful.

What makes Nicki such an appealing character is that she represents something wonderfully recognisable. She is the friend who wants to be there for everyone, even when her own world is changing around her. Harcus brings that balance of strength and vulnerability to the role, giving Nicki an emotional journey that complements Matt's without ever overshadowing it.



Sheila Samuels demonstrates her versatility by taking on the dual roles of the Doctor and the Airbnb Owner, two characters who serve very different purposes within the story.

Playing multiple roles within the same production is always an interesting challenge, particularly when the characters occupy such contrasting worlds. It requires an actor to establish distinct personalities while ensuring that each character feels like a natural part of the wider narrative.

As the Doctor, Samuels takes on a role that is central to the more serious elements of the play. The medical conversations surrounding Matt's condition carry enormous emotional significance, and the Doctor must provide a credible presence within those moments.

The role requires an appropriate sense of professionalism and authority, helping to ground the medical elements of the story in a recognisable reality.

By contrast, the Airbnb Owner introduces an entirely different character and offers Samuels the opportunity to demonstrate another side of her acting abilities.

The contrast between these two roles is an appealing aspect of the production, showcasing the flexibility required of performers working within a small ensemble.

Samuels's contribution is particularly important in broadening the world of the play beyond its central friendship group. Both characters help shape the circumstances surrounding Matt's journey, and her dual casting adds another dimension to the production.

A versatile contribution from an actress tasked with bringing two contrasting characters into the same intimate theatrical world.



One of the most significant aspects of *Bad Blood – 20 Years Later* is the personal inspiration behind the writing.

Bernie Winston has drawn upon the experience of his own former best friend to create a story that examines not just the realities of illness but the extraordinary importance of friendship during times of crisis.

That personal connection gives the piece a particular poignancy, and it is perhaps this understanding of the human experience that makes the premise so affecting.

Winston's decision to revisit these characters after the original award-winning production is an intriguing one. Rather than offering a neatly packaged ending in which everything remains happily resolved, he acknowledges a far more uncomfortable truth: life does not stop presenting challenges simply because we have already overcome one.

As both writer and director, Winston has the opportunity to shape not only the words spoken on stage but also the emotional tone of the production.

The story calls for a careful balance between the seriousness of Matt's situation and the humour that comes from the relationships surrounding him. Too much sentimentality could make the

piece feel unnecessarily heavy, while too much comedy could undermine the importance of its subject matter.

It is this contrast that gives the writing its distinctive character.

Winston understands that humour is often one of the ways we cope with the most difficult moments in life. We joke when we are nervous, laugh when we are frightened and sometimes say completely inappropriate things simply because we cannot find anything else to say.

And, of course, it is often those very moments that make the strongest friendships so special.

There is also something particularly touching about a writer returning to a story that has such personal significance. In doing so, Winston not only revisits the characters of his original play but also reminds us of the lasting impact that people can have on our lives.

Studio Beyond in Liverpool provides the sort of intimate theatrical environment that is particularly well suited to a character-driven drama such as this.

Unlike larger productions that rely on elaborate scenery and theatrical spectacle, a play of this nature depends heavily on its performers and their ability to draw an audience into the emotional world of the characters.

The intimacy of the space places greater emphasis on the acting, allowing the audience to concentrate on the dialogue, the relationships and the human experiences at the centre of the story.

It is the kind of environment in which subtle performances can have just as much impact as larger dramatic moments.

With a cast of just four performers, the production places considerable responsibility on each actor to contribute to the storytelling, and the different personalities of Matt, Eddie and Nicki provide the emotional variety that such a piece requires.

In many ways, the simplicity of the setting feels entirely appropriate.

After all, some of the most important conversations we will ever have take place in the most ordinary of surroundings.

Ultimately, *Bad Blood – 20 Years Later* is a touching reminder that while we cannot always control the cards life deals us, having the right people sitting beside us can make all the difference.

The friends who make us laugh when we want to cry. The people who turn up when things get difficult. And those rare individuals who understand that sometimes the greatest act of friendship is simply refusing to let someone face their fears alone.

A heartfelt piece of Liverpool theatre that combines a serious and deeply personal subject with humour, warmth and an enduring celebration of friendship.

Reviewer: Matthew Maney - AMT Productions

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