

Bouncers

Amateur Players of Sherborne

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Date seen: 9 September 2025

Director: Sarah Webster

John Godber's script for Bouncers is a very strong one but it provides just the bare bones for a stage production; it requires the skill and creativity of the director and the talent, energy and creativity of the cast to flesh it out, to tell the story and present the audience with a show that engages and entertains them. APS delivered a triumph of a production, bringing the concept and the script to life, delighting and moving the audience.

The achievement was all the greater because the fleshing out was done with so little set, so few props. With the assistance of judicious lighting and sound, it was done primarily through the choreography, pacing, energy and talent of the actors, who, under excellent Direction (Sarah Webster), enabled the audience to imagine and to relate to what was being presented on stage.

The simple set (Sarah Webster and John Crabtree) was certainly effective; at the rear of the stage was a representation of the exterior of the Mr Cinders nightclub, with four boxes in front which were put to for various purposes through the play. The majority of the action takes place just outside the nightclub but it switches to other locations such as a hairdresser, a barber's shop and the toilets inside the club, with each setting created through the performances and some creative lighting and sound. The stage floor seemed to have a certain stickiness, so that shoes squeaked during walking as though from a dried layer of spilled beer and this added to the nightclub atmosphere.

The acting was nothing short of brilliant from all four of the cast. In addition to their primary roles as the four bouncers they each took on a multitude of other characters, snapping out of one part and into the next on the turn of a sixpence. The whole show was a triumph of 'physical theatre'; each character was expertly delineated and brought to life, without the aid of costumes, through body movements and voice. The four women were a particular highlight but all of the characters were engaging. Delivery of the lines was strong and the timing was spot-on, whether straight or comic. Above all, all four actors discharged high-voltage energy throughout the play which enlivened their characters and the interactions between them.

This strong engagement with the audience was there even before the start of the show, with the four bouncers wandering around, totally in character, as the audience came in and sat down; they stood around looking tough, chatted to each other, played cards etc, and there was some nice ad-libbing when some late-coming audience members arrived and sat down.

Les (Harry Wopat) was assured and confident as the volatile bouncer and in all of his other roles, including one of the 'posh blokes' at the club. His portrayal of a woman whose boyfriend had been 'snogging' someone else was particularly strong, generating both humour and feeling, as was his delightful characterisation of a

Liverpudlian (Bernie?). He inhabited each role totally and with conviction and great physicality, as in his depiction of punk, splaying one of his hands over his head to represent a Mohican hair-cut.

The other punk in that scene was played by Jordan Wiseman, who provided a strong, calm centre to the play as the bouncer Ralph, often the voice of reason when the other three were becoming highly emotional. This is not an easy act to pull off convincingly and to maintain the audience's interest but he really succeeded, playing silent and tough, smoking a cigarette, superbly. He was able to switch effortlessly into the role of the DJ and was excellent as the other of the two 'posh blokes'.

Judd (Gary Brooks) gave a masterclass in sustained 'attitude' when playing that role of the bouncer who enjoys winding up Lucky Eric, moving sometimes into aggression with hints of menace but slipping easily back into wit and humour. Convincing in each of his parts, the hairdresser and client scene was quite a highlight and he provided a strong start to the play in leading a rap song which helped to set the scene and atmosphere for the audience after Lucky Eric's introduction.

All four actors had great stage presence and Lucky Eric (Freddie Wopat), who played the part of narrator in the play as well his own brilliant characterisation of the older bouncer (and many other characters) seemed to own the stage. He exuded a still strength and commanding, natural ease, while also showing troubled, thoughtful and philosophic sides to the character. Whichever character he was playing he inhabited it completely and was totally convincing. Lucky Eric introduced the play, setting the scene, and it was interspersed with his delivery of three powerful monologues. These very effectively slowed the pace from the high-energy scenes, providing variety, humour and great pathos, with their insights into the world of the nightclub and Lucky Eric's own psychology and feelings. He gripped the audience, hitting all the right notes and finding just the right pace and tone to deliver the emotion to the audience with a punch. His second speech, about a woman in a pub being kissed and felt by everyone, was riveting, very real, very moving. He was equally strong at comedy too, both verbal and physical as when playing a drunk asking the DJ to play 'decent' music, or providing a huge belch on cue. As with all four actors his timing was superb and as with all four he was great at stillness; those moments of silence and stillness contrasting powerfully with the energy and movement that dominated the play. He was particularly impressive in the way in which he could hold a pause, bringing the audience to the edge of their seats.

While each of the four demonstrated great individual strengths it was very much an ensemble piece, with all four actors working really well and tightly together. The Director made very good use of the stage and what made this production shine and scintillate was, in addition to the energy, the 'choreography'; both during each set-piece and when moving from one scene or setting to the next. The lads miming downing pints at the bar, for example, or the slow-motion fight. The miming of the taxi ride was delightful and the rendition of the portrayal of the 'porno' film, was hilarious, particularly when they did the fast rewind when the imaginary projector malfunctioned. This and the version of Michael Jackson's Thriller (?) at the end when the four bouncers wore their jackets back to front had the audience in gales of laughter.

There was very creative use of the fourth wall, with the bouncers sometimes speaking directly to the audience, and some amusing self-referential comments, as when they introduced Lucky Eric's speeches and when Eric, after a nod to Shakespeare's Richard III, asked them "time for a social comment?" and Gary replied "no, keep it going"; or when Gary, having played the barber, appeared as Terry and the other three said in unison "I thought he was the barber".

The pacing was just right: fast-moving and very tight, with the rapid switching between characters and scenes giving the whole thing energy and drive. Lighting (Adrian Hole and Clive Miller) was used effectively to create both the 'inside' of the nightclub, with an array of bright colours alternating up and down to give the effect of the dance floor, and the area in front of the club. Sound (Mark Lambert) enhanced the atmosphere with music from the 1980s and some lovely sound effects such as the drip-drip for the toilets, followed by the sound of four fly zips being done up.

Congratulations to all on a wonderful evening's entertainment. This was theatre at its powerful best, following Peter Brook's approach of taking an 'empty stage' and creating a series of worlds on it.

Martin Stephen
NODA South West Representative, District 11