

BOYS: PRESS RESPONSES

Headlong: Hightide / Southampton / Soho Theatre (2012)

Directed by Robert Icke

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THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ben Brantley

“Boys,” a production of the Headlong, High Tide Festival and Nuffield Theaters that recently ended its run at the Soho Theater, takes place during a sanitation strike in Edinburgh, and garbage keeps mounting in and around the flat of its college-age title characters. Ms. Hickson — who made a mark just out of university in 2008 with “Eight,” snapshots of no-hopers on the edge of adulthood — has now created a full-length, traditional drama about youth in a state of both crisis and stasis.

The script of “Boys” is as cluttered as Chloe Lamford’s very convincing set. In following a concentrated spree of post-finals, pre-graduation revelry, Ms. Hickson crams in several warehouses’ worth of plot and symbols. But melodrama is the metabolic right of people nearing the ends of their adolescence (which seems to extend beyond 30 now). And the superlative cast, directed by Robert Icke, embodies the roller-coaster rhythms of that metabolism, enhanced by various stimulants and depressants, with all the spontaneity and self-consciousness of last-gasp youth.

It helps that Ms. Hickson has an inspired ear for the snark, silliness and whimsy marshaled by people trying to avoid thoughts of their future. The insults they exchange have the ring of stoned originality as well as of authenticity. (“Aren’t you lovely when you’re angry? You’re like a very troubled tomato.”)

When, after much drinking and drugging, the characters explode into a wondrous, frightening, garbage-flinging free-for-all, middle-aged viewers may find themselves muttering both “Ah, to be young again” and “Thank God I’m not young anymore.”

★★★★

THE SUNDAY TIMES

David Jays

In Ella Hickson’s fresh, urgent play, graduation feels less like a bright dawn, more the beginning of the end of your life. Morning is broken in a squalid Edinburgh student flat — a rattle of pills and Coco Pops for brekky, a violin smeared with yoghurt, an unnamed Polish lass in the bath. As the day unravels, bin bags mount up and everyone gets trashed amid the trash, while bereft Benny (the excellent Danny Kirrane) lurks in his place of safety on top of the fridge and urges people to discuss his brother’s suicide. Hickson’s title is misleading: her girls are just as tangled as the lads. And the play doesn’t quite earn its apocalyptic trappings, with unrest fermenting on the reeking streets. Yet Hickson points to the shrunken opportunities awaiting the young ‘uns, and nails the way they mythologise their mucky anecdotes. Robert Icke’s production for Headlong gives her writing all the time it needs — speedy gabble as the party kicks off, counterpointed with aching solos and pained duets. A substantial achievement.

★★★★

WHAT'S ON STAGE

Michael Coveney

Oh no, not another play about students making a mess in a flat? Er, yes, and a whole lot more, too. Something like a contemporary version of The Young Ones on riot alert, Ella Hickson’s fierce and funny Boys is the strongest indication yet of her emergent talent.

She’s pulling out all the stops in Robert Icke’s savage and beautifully detailed Headlong production, presented in collaboration with the High Tide Festival and the Nuffield, Southampton. The setting – and what a work of colourful chaos that is in Chloe Lamford’s superb design – is a five-man student flat in Edinburgh.

Well, it’s now a four-man flat, owing to a sudden departure, and a stranded girlfriend, Sophie, is finding consolation with one of the others. Mack and Benny are both at the university, while Cam is on the verge of a breakthrough as a professional violinist and wild man Timp, who works in a nearby restaurant, is turning thirty.

It’s permanent party time – drugs, alcohol, more drugs – as the rubbish bags pile up during a strike, the police mount a blockade along Princes Street, and Cam and Timp are recovering after leading a group of freshers astray on a spurious guided tour of the city; a sixteen year-old Polish girl has stayed overnight and passed out in the bathroom. We never see her, but the whole of the frenetically sustained brouhaha catches the drama of Cam’s debut; the sexual dependency of Laura (Alison O’Donnell) on Tom Mothersdale’s wonderfully erratic and outrageous Timp – he prances round the flat in “Spank” pants and a ludicrous Mohican hair-cut; and the sadness of shuffling towards the reality of getting a job and facing the real world.

The play is quite long and – this is unusual nowadays – gives itself time to breathe properly. The actors have long lyrical speeches and there are great shifting sands of mood and atmosphere on the stage, which is beautifully lit by Michael Nabarro.

And anchoring it all is the performance of Danny Kirrane (last seen in Jerusalem) as the plump, blonde, unhappy Benny, a vivid cross between the wild rock singer Deco in *The Commitments* and Philip Seymour Hoffman at his sleaziest. Benny stays up all night sitting on top of the fridge and finally snaps as the political situation on the street literally spills over into the flat in one of the strongest design coups of the year so far.

Samuel Edward Crook's sullen, sturdy Mack quietly disengages from Eve Ponsonby's needy, attractive and confused Sophie, all part of the dying fall in a brilliant ensemble piece where there's still time for one last party blast. Or is there?

★★★★

THE INDEPENDENT

Paul Taylor

Ella Hickson's marvellous play makes a well-timed arrival at Soho Theatre in Robert Icke's superbly cast co-production for Headlong, HighTide and the Nuffield Theatre.

All over the country now, university students are in that strange limbo between finishing their exams and being flung into an unforgiving future that is both the actual lot of the Edinburgh flat-sharers in the piece and, thanks to Hickson's terrific tragicomic touch, a metaphor for a state of mind – an unsettling mixture of relief and foreboding, nostalgia for parties past and the sense that, for you, the party may soon be over – that resurfaces, in modified forms, throughout the rest of one's life.

It's an abnormally hot August; stinking bags of rubbish are piling up in the cruddy kitchen because of a strike by refuse workers; the landlord's inspection is imminent; and, propped amid the debris, there's a nicked Barclays sign proclaiming that, "We'll loan you the best years of your life". This is an ironic epigraph to a play that can be forgiven for bulging at times because of the superabundance of its virtues – charming, off-the-wall humour; energetic dialogue; and the poignancy, poetry and quirky philosophising that it manages to accommodate with no shrieking shifts of gear.

Often sitting like a frumpy Humpty Dumpty on top of the fridge, Danny Kirrane's splendid, endearingly uningratiating Benny is the heart of the piece, with his First, his troubled awareness that he will never know more than he knows now (all of it useless) and his need to believe that through making choices one can make a difference. By contrast, it suits his enigmatic, sexually exploitative friend/adversary Mack (a simmering Samuel Edward Cook) to take a cynically defeatist line, while Lorn Macdonald's lovely Scot Cam longs to opt out of the nervous strain of being on the brink of stardom as a violinist.

Taking drugs for breakfast and cavorting around in his Y-fronts, livewire Timp (excellent Tom Mothersdale) – in his late 20s – batters on the student-life, without being a student. It's a way of endlessly refusing to commit to his girlfriend Laura (a touchingly chirpy-sad Alison O'Donnell) who promises to love him even when the effect of time on his tattoos makes him look like "a page of writing that's been rained on".

Tensions rise in a play that both powerfully captures the mood of a generation and addresses permanent truths with exhilarating flair.

THE TIMES

Dominic Maxwell

What an exciting writer Ella Hickson is. Yes, *Boys*, her third play, in which student flatmates reach the ends of their tethers as they reach the ends of their degrees, promises more in its dynamic first hour than it always knows what to do with in its second. But even that is oddly fitting for an admirably ambitious story about twentysomethings who see their futures as indebted and uncertain.

So, as they hang out in their Edinburgh kitchen, this bunch are starting to feel nostalgic for the life they are still leading (there must be a German word for this). The brooding Mack has just taken a sixth-former's virginity. The loquacious and outrageous Timp has just cheated on his girlfriend again. Cam, a concert violinist, the one with a future, wonders if he wants it. Only Benny, lurking on top of the fridge, mourning the suicide of his brother, looks beyond pill-popping and partying as a rubbish strike leads to social breakdown.

Yet the other flatmates try to ignore the rubbish piling up. That's partly symbolic, a point underscored when Robert Icke's charged production breaks off from capturing the combative chemistry of bright young men for the odd expressionist flourish. Yet what really impresses is the way the show captures a twilight mood between hope and despair, in which partying blots out fear. The female characters — Alison O'Donnell as Timp's girlfriend, Laura, and Eve Ponsonby as Benny's brother's girlfriend, Sophie — have their eyes on a committed future. The boys can't think that far ahead.

Instead Samuel Edward Cook's fit, furious Mack is forever squaring off to Danny Kirrane as the big, bereaved Benny, who has an intelligence beyond his ability to find a context for it. Tom Mothersdale's gabby Timp is too much and he knows it. Lorn Macdonald doesn't look entirely convinced by himself as Cam, but then Cam isn't entirely convinced by himself either. Where next?

Yes, that's been the theme of a billion and one bloody awful graduate plays since long before endemic individualism, economic meltdown and £9,000-a-year fees.

But Hickson knows her characters off by heart, gives them wit and depth. The second half is more reflective, sometimes strains for significance. The battle between Benny's collectivism and Mack's macho self-reliance doesn't resolve itself. Cam's fate, by contrast, is an unconvincing contrivance. But *Boys* is invigorating, and brilliantly played: *The Young Ones* reborn as tragicomedy.

TIME OUT

Honour Bayes

Boys will be boys. Not since *'Men Behaving Badly'* has a situation comedy so delighted in the old adage. Ella Hickson's *'Boys'* is as funny as the ITV/BBC kidult classic. But it is also a wounded look at a generation who feel the world owes them and know it isn't going to deliver; a plea for old heroic values in a society run by villains.

Final exams are done and the lease is up on Benny, Mack, Timp and Cam's flat. But before they go they're throwing one more drug-fuelled party to launch them into the aggressive adult world. Chloe Lamford's design creates the perfect conditions for a group teetering on the edge of an explosion. A leaning tower of pizza boxes and months of dirty dishes pile up against see-through Perspex walls with banks of lights behind; this room is both student kitchen and human pressure cooker.

Robert Icke's cool direction and his cast's fearless emotional immediacy and tight comic timing add a level of sophistication to this riotous sitcom.

THE PUBLIC REVIEWS

Sarah Nutland

It's the end of an era for four lads and their rubbish ridden flat in Edinburgh, as their lease, course and life (as they know it) is about to expire. This is *Boys a Headlong*, HighTide Festival Theatre and The Nuffield, Southampton production currently playing at the Soho Theatre.

I have to start by saying that this play is stunning. It brilliantly portrays student life with its tea drinking and house parties, but with a real heart and human emphasis that rarely gets conveyed about the student community. Ella Hickson definitely has a point to make and a story to tell, which she does wonderfully. It is slick, fast paced and truly captivating.

The subject matter is extremely topical, amidst the student fee increases, raising questions about spending money on a degree that probably won't lead to a job, as there aren't any. It captures the mood of a generation in an utterly believable and relatable way.

There is a real mix of personalities in the show, from party hard Timp to musical prodigy Cam, but all of them have a child-like innocence, which is really endearing. Each character has their own demons, but they're also collectively trying to deal with the death of Benny's brother, for which the rubbish acts as a wonderful metaphor for the mess that he's left behind. The cast each give stellar performances portraying the characters with real conviction.

The seamless direction of Robert Icke is clear to see, as there's never a dull moment in the very lively action and the moment of stylised slow movement as Benny seems to unravel is fantastic. The play builds momentum as things start to really fall apart, with the rubbish fight acting as a fitting explosion of feeling towards the end of the play.

The set is great; the flat's kitchen is grubby, covered in posters and filled with washing up and things stolen on nights out. Tom Mill's sound design really adds to the feel and dynamics of the piece, as well as Michael Nabarro's creative lighting that punctuates the scenes.

It is a totally absorbing piece of theatre, which is hilariously funny and tragic in equal measures. This is a play not to be missed!