

Review 'This is my father'

By Michael Coveney – www.whatsonstage.com

This Is My Father by Ilay den Boer, in which a real life Dutch father and son act out their differences, using instant translation as a dramatic weapon, over a campaign of anti-semitism in the soccer locker room.

Ilay and his dad, Gert den Boer, improvise the opening skirmishes to such an infuriating extent that audience members in Bobigny -- a blessedly unsophisticated crowd -- starting joining in the conversation, then answering back, then heckling and, in some cases, storming out.

"We've done fifty-four performances of this play, and never had such a reaction," said Ilay on stage, getting angrier. One vociferous woman's complaint was that this was not "une spectacle," which reminds me of the old woman complaining about Eugene O'Neill as she left the theatre: "That was more of a play than a show, I guess."

But before too long the irate woman had her complaint thrust unceremoniously back down her throat as the piece careered mercilessly into an exposition of the son's disagreement with his father -- Ilay is Jewish (like his mother), his father, not -- a ferocious account of a showdown with the anti-semites, and the transformation of the stage into a scenic riot of Dutch football fascism on the terraces of the club they both love, Feyenoord (much more of a problem there than it is here; the Jewish fans at Spurs chant their own anti-semitism --- "Yiddo, yiddo" -- which I suppose makes it all right) while Ilay, a champion schoolboy goalkeeper, stands naked, and circumcised, before his own father, and us.

Father and son have learned to live with their differences, but it makes for an uneasy hour and a half's viewing, as Ilay, speaking in Dutch, badgers and bullies his father with the litanical command of "translate" (into French in Bobigny, but he could just as easily do so into English).

This Is My Father is an unusual, unsettling and deeply moving play -- though "play" is not quite the right word -- and all the more so, of course, for having the reality factor of an utterly authentic documentary, as well as a nervy "can this really be happening" element.

Clybourne Park went off like a bomb in Sloane Square. So did This Is My Father in Bobigny. This is to do with the conflict of expectation in the audience. The trouble with Clybourne Park now is there is no surprise element. I hope we soon get the chance to see if the same might apply to This Is My Father.

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