

Edinburgh Theatre: Us/Them at Summerhall

The Beslan massacre is given such bold, off-centre treatment in Carly Wijs's production that it inspires much deeper consideration

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Gytha Parmentier and Roman Van Houtven star in a piece based on the Beslan massacre of 2004

★★★★☆

A complaint regularly levelled at theatre inspired by real-life events is that it can often be delivered in a clinically dry, documentary style, as though the subject alone is enough to catch and retain an audience's attention. One might just as well spend the admission price on a selection of newspapers.

No such criticism could be made of this startling production from the Brussels-based company Bronks, which specialises in making grown-up theatre for children and young people. The piece is based on the Beslan massacre of 2004, in which an armed group demanding recognition of Chechen independence occupied a school in North Ossetia (part of

the Russian Federation), holding 1,000 people hostage, including nearly 800 children. The three-day siege culminated in the deaths of at least 385 people.

The bare facts of this terrible episode are well known, but the story is given such bold, off-centre treatment in Carly Wijs's production that it inspires a much deeper consideration of the massacre, its context and implications, than a simple dramatisation could hope to achieve. As performed by Gytha Parmentier and Roman Van Houtven, every moment of the siege is recounted from the child's-eye view, so that marginal details are imbued with significance and enchantment is wrought from brutal adult behaviour.

The perspective is so novel that it takes a while for us to pinpoint exactly which tale this pair is breathlessly trying to recount. The back wall bearing tiny coats of various colours is the first unsettling clue as to our whereabouts. However, the most chilling moments are not the details about the stifling heat in the gym hall or the bloody denouement. The true horror lies in the macabre fairytale these children have absorbed, about the deviant people who live on the other side of the forest in Grozny, and the fact that both, at such a young age, already define themselves in opposition to another community.

Inevitably the script is full of strange little asides and humour so glib that you feel the occasional pang of guilt for laughing. Yet, out of the mouths of these babes and innocents, this innovative piece of theatrical storytelling also repeatedly brings us up short.

Box office: 0131 560 1581, to August 28