



Us / Them



by [Alan Stewart](#) on 17th August 2016

I can count on one hand the number of plays that have sent shivers down my spine: *Us/Them* is one such show. Telling the true story of the Beslan school siege in 2004, *Us/Them* is a phenomenal piece of theatre that I urge anyone in Edinburgh this August to see.

You must go and see this show. Now.

Gytha Parmentier and Roman Van Houtven are exceptional performers. For the majority of the play they adopt the roles of two pupils caught up in the horrors of the siege. When playing the children neither actor veers into the usual clichés of grinning impishly or raising their vocal pitch. Instead, they convey the innocence of their subjects through more nuanced details like fidgeting with clothing or competitively interrupting one another in a bid to impress their listeners. So successful are Parmentier and Van Houtven, in fact, that I sometimes forgot I was watching adults.

The way in which tragedy and comedy were intertwined was also remarkable. At one point Van Houtven impersonates the butcher's wife, a parent of a child held captive in School Number One. Letting forth a blood-curdling scream, Van Houtven offered a visceral depiction of the mother's terror. However, before this threatened to become too harrowing, he then resumed his role as a child, commenting on his previous action and offering the matter of fact aside, "The butcher's wife is very emotional." Given that this show was aimed primarily at a young audience, the choice to blend tragedy and comedy was judicious: it meant that the subject matter was always treated with the respect it deserved while never becoming too bleak or traumatic.

The way in which a fresh perspective was offered on the characters surrounding the Beslan hostage crisis was a further cause for celebration. In the same way that the play sought to humanise the victims of the massacre, so too did it humanise the terrorists. It refused to demonise the hostage-takers: something I can't remember ever having seen in theatre or film before. Consequently, it made for fascinating and thought-provoking drama.

I could go on and wax lyrical over the incredible choreographed sequences or the hugely imaginative use of set and props, but I shan't. I don't want to spoil it. I'll simply conclude by stating, emphatically, that you must go and see this show. Now.

<http://www.broadwaybaby.com/shows/us-them/714970>