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REVIEW: Day of the Flymo rehearsals, Live Theatre

Thanks to Northumbria University's partnership with Live Theatre, MA Social Work students, Lewis O' Roberts and Alison Hodges were invited to step behind the scenes and join a rehearsal of Day of the Flymo – a new play written by Northumbria University graduate, Paddy Campbell. Day of theFlymo explores the lives of looked-after children and young people, a subject that both Lewis and Alison are studying as part of their master's course. They share their views on the play below. (warning: contains plot spoilers!)

Last week we were given a fascinating insight into [Day of the Flymo](#) – a new play that looks at the lives of young people deemed to be chaotic, and the mechanisms that swing into action when social services step in.

On arrival we watched as the actors and production team familiarised themselves with the intimate performance space for the first time. The cast consists of two professional actors and three young actors from the Live's Youth Theatre. The young actors we observed articulated themselves with skill and composure and highlighted the value of Live's Youth Theatre and the importance of supporting local creative projects. It was great to see these budding stars learning from those with experience and seeing that even professionals forget their lines sometimes!

As social work students, we were invited to observe rehearsals and reflect on key social work themes, practice issues and values within the play. The themes we discuss here are based on observations from the rehearsal of the second act.

Looked after children

Through the eyes of 13-year old Liam and his family, the play highlights the challenges and vulnerabilities that children and young people face when they become involved in the care system. Throughout the play the audience are given regular narration from Ben, the social worker, each time reading out key sections of Liam's case notes. We are told that Ben is concerned that Liam is at risk of child sexual exploitation and substance misuse. We also learn that Liam regularly absconds from his children's' home and struggles with his sense-of-self.

Statistics show that children who spend time in the care system are more likely to run away, have problems with crime, drugs, and mental health. These negative outcomes can also make care leavers more vulnerable to abuse ([NSPCC](#)). By highlighting some of these issues, Day of the Flymo presents the audience with a personal and very real insight into the realities of the care system.

The social work role

The social work role and the challenges of making difficult decisions are

covered through the portrayal of Ben. He appears uneasy in the knowledge that the decisions he makes could change the trajectory of Liam's life. We begin to question whether Ben is trying to convince himself, or the family, that the correct decisions have been made for Liam.

We also see how important the use of language is within social work. In one scene Ben tells Liam's mum that "I can appreciate how difficult it must be for you", upon which Liam's mum gets very angry and vocal. Ben's mum is the expert on her own life and professionals need to recognise this and use communication effectively and with subtlety. Can a social worker ever really 'appreciate' someone's situation?

Similarly, Ben talks to Liam's mum, stating that "nobody is judging you, I am trying to be as open and honest as I can". Liam's mum challenges Ben; "do you actually believe what you are saying!" Effective social work must be non-judgmental and anti-oppressive but in this case, at times it seems like Ben has forgotten where the power dynamics lie. It is almost as if he is going through the motions and structural and procedural factors are impinging on his ability to stay true to his social work values.

Service pressures

Throughout the play we are reminded of the structural issues that affect both the family and social services. When Liam's mum finds out how much it costs to support a child in the care sector she reminds us of the challenges of living in poverty, "if I had an extra 30 quid a week, you know the difference that would make?"

Ben also tells us about the role of marketisation in the care sector stating that 'the difficult kids' are outsourced to private companies, and that they make a profit out of it.

Final thoughts

When Liam absconds from his care home he often finds himself in extremely vulnerable situations. In one scene he states that he's "13 and living in a toilet". Day of the Flymo portrays the hard reality of children in the care system and the challenging decisions that social workers have to make. It also highlights the challenges of working in a system constrained by the

limits of resource. Society must do more to protect and support vulnerable young people and support families before they reach crisis point.

Day of the Flymo premieres at Live Theatre, Newcastle from Wednesday 8 April to Saturday 11 April. Tickets cost from £5 (students and concessions) to £14. For more information and to book tickets call Live Theatre's box office on (0191) 232 1232 or see www.live.org.uk

Northumbria PhD student, John Hickman, whose research explores the representations of looked-after children in the media, will be joining a post-show talkback panel after the performance on Friday 10 April.

To find out more about Northumbria's MA Social Work course, click [here](#).

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