



Rosa (Hannah Genesius) and Jacob (Josh Collins)

Life was like being in a room with a locked door.

On the afternoon of Saturday, 25 March, a fire breaks out in a sweatshop and because of insufficient safety measures 146 people perish in the flames, 136 of them women. Although this terrible event happened in New York in 1911, it might as well be found in today's news - reporting on a factory in one of the countries where our clothes are now manufactured and workers often endure similar conditions to the sweatshop workers in New York 100 years ago.

Winner of the 2015 Canadian Jewish Playwriting Competition, and a finalist in the 2015 Henley Rose Playwriting Competition for Women, Alix Sobler's play tells the individual stories of some of the doomed workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, most of them young Jewish women from Eastern Europe and Russia, who came to America for a better life.

The traverse stage is bare except for a few big suitcases. Splintered, burnt wooden slabs decorate the maroon walls, resembling a creepy skyline of a big American city (stage design by Sebastian Noel). The performance is framed by Tim Shaw's music, resembling Jewish folk songs. After their opening song, the cast state that their characters are not real, they are representatives of those who died in the fire, whose lives have been summarised. They could be from any country - Russia, Ukraine, Poland but the main character is to be Rosa, a young Jewish woman from Russia.

Rosa (Hannah Genesius) is tired of living in a country where persecution and pogroms are regular occurrences. She feels like she is trapped in a cage. Her brother Avram (Josh Collins), a Marxist, urges her to stay and help him change the country - the Russian revolution had not happened yet - but Rosa prefers to try her luck in America with her sister Sadie (Mitzli Rose Neville). When Sadie meets a nice young man on the boat and marries him, she leaves Rosa to fend for herself. Rosa manages to find work in a sewing factory and helps support Sadie's family. She also makes a new friend - the poet Manya (Emma King) from Poland, who helps Rosa tell her story and prods her to continue whenever she is tempted to stop.

Alix Sobler's play is softened with a bit of humour and romance. Most of the workers are young Jewish women who converse in Yiddish. In one scene, Italian newbie Sophie (Mitzli Rose Neville) compliments Rosa on her very good English, confusing Yiddish with English because everybody in the factory seems to speak it. Rosa also attracts a suitor, Jacob (Josh Collins), who works as a cutter in the factory, but Rosa is reluctant because he admires her beauty, not her intellect.

Rosa's work is hard, back-breaking. Foreman Max (Michael Kiersey), a "pawn of the capitalist pigs" is driving them mercilessly and the noise of the rattling sewing machines, created by the cast, reverberates in the intimate theatre. In 1909, Rosa decides to join the general strike of New York's shirtwaist industry, together with 20,000 others. One of the union leaders is 23-year old Clara Lemlich (Mitzli Rose Neville) who suffers brutal beatings by paid thugs. The strike lasts for eleven weeks. Some of their demands are met but safety regulations are not on top of the list.

Skilfully and sensitively directed by Rory McGregor, the play has a very Brechtian approach, with the cast frequently commenting on their actions and those of their characters. In one very touching scene, Manya refuses to accept what is going to happen to her. Instead she tells us the future that she sees for herself, as it should have happened. Sadly, there is no alternative for Manya.

A very important play with an impressive cast that should not be missed.

By Carolin Kopplin

Until 20th September 2016

[Finborough Theatre](#)

Running time: 90 minutes without an interval.

Photograph by Graeme Braidwood.

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