

Burning up

BOILERHOUSE's heady mix of theatre and club culture has left London audiences hot under the collar. The theatre company returns to Edinburgh with an explosive new show and exploitation on its mind. Words: Eddie Gibb Main photograph: Jonathan Littlejohn

THE LOCATION HAPPENS to be the top of Edinburgh's Easter Road, but picture any church hall, with the scuffed lines of a badminton court on the floor and the walls painted a shade of grubby pink. The WI ladies could be along any minute with cups of milky tea and a catering-sized biscuit tin.

The only sign anything is amiss in this particular church hall is a photocopied notice taped to the pillars which reads: 'Drugs and controlled substances prohibited on site.' The space is being used by experimental theatre collective Boilerhouse for rehearsals. Could it be that the minister heard of the Edinburgh company's reputation for mixing club culture and drama with its performances of the Irvine Welsh-penned play. *Headstate*?

For once, this is not a case of church heid-yins becoming agitated at the prospect of yet more filth and depravity on the Fringe. The warning signs were souvenirs from the company's recent run at the Greenwich Festival in London's East End, which had prompted a nervous licensing authority to impose last-minute restrictions on the show before it was allowed to go ahead. What other theatre production have you seen which required a GP to be in attendance during performances? Then again, most play scripts aren't published with an introduction by the author which reads: 'My concept was for punters to come along, neck a pill, get into it, then head off to a club.'

Boilerhouse first performed the play they devised with Welsh in 1994, and the production was revived for last year's Festival before transferring to London for what was, licence hassles aside, a triumphant two-week run. For one thing the *Daily Telegraph*

described *Headstate* as 'an altogether hateful show: mindlessly trendy, pretentious and mean-spirited... [an] urban nightmare of disease, degradation and physical and emotional abuse'. With a notice like that, Boilerhouse knew it had succeeded in its stated aim of passing the theatre establishment to hell (but not the audience of clubland).

Now the experiment continues, with a new play *Seizer* which premieres during the Edinburgh Festival, and features the same cast as *Headstate*. What it doesn't have is a direct Irvine Welsh inspiration, or any obvious drug references. The title is a pun on the theme of

exploitation, but this new show written by Spencer Hazel, whose previous credits include *Klub* and *Flesh*, takes on television. *Seizer* considers the increase in programmes which turn the cameras on people in the throes of emotional crisis in the name of entertainment. Come on down, Oprah. Go, Ricki. The price is right, Kilroy.

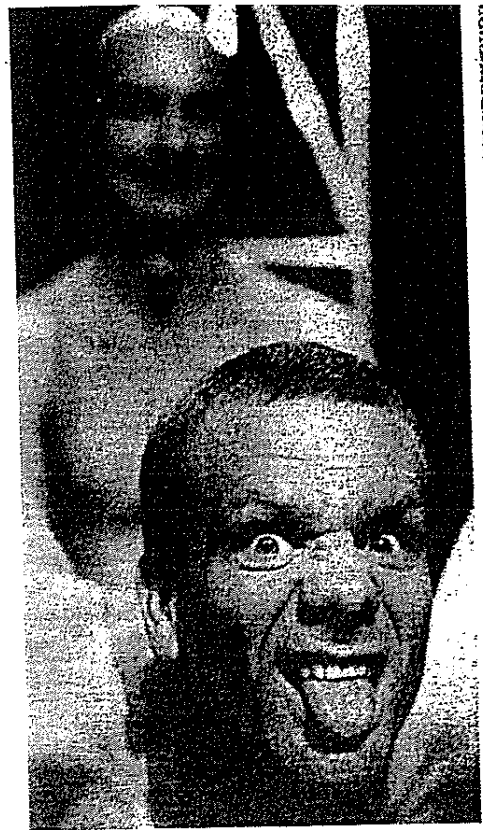
'If Oprah has someone that's suffered date rape on the show and at the end she says, OK, now you haven't seen him since that night twelve years ago but we have got him here tonight, are you going to switch off at that point?' says Boilerhouse director, Paul Pinson. 'No, you're going to go, I want to see her face. However much you say that you are aware it is crass programming, you probably won't switch off.'

The show's title is a word play on Caesar – Boilerhouse is trying to make a connection between the Roman Empire's love of blood-soaked spectacle and the gladiator's ring of the TV studio. Edinburgh actor Tam Dean Burn plays *Seizer*, a charismatic manipulator who exploits the emotions of the other characters to entertain the audience.

'He's a pure bastard but he is the master of ceremonies,' says Burn. 'He is Kilroy, he is the DJ, he is in control and that's the basic rule. The other three have got to do what I tell them.'

Like *Headstate*, *Seizer* is a promenade production which aims to unsettle the audience's traditionally passive relationship with the performers. The show is being staged at the Old Quad, one of the older Edinburgh University buildings which, as its name suggests, has a large quadrangle surrounded by terraces that forms a perfect amphitheatre. *Seizer* will kick up gravel in a motorised chariot, which may or may not be made out of a converted ambulance, kitted out with searchlights and DJ decks. 'It's going to be a souped-up vehicle,' he promises.

Back in the rehearsal hall, the other three cast members writhe around the floor in parodies of sexual ecstasy while Burn stands impassively in the centre of the room. At one point he unrolls and nonchalantly scrolls a Trumpet's leakage, a product which may be



Tam Dean Burn and Jan Knightly in *Headstate*

about to make its debut in a radical theatre performance as the shaven-headed Denise Evans gets to lick some of the fluffy white filling off his fingers. On a backing tape.

Underworld pump out a looping techno beat and it's just possible to imagine how the crew might succeed in its aim of combining epic spectacle and

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intimate emotion.

The cast are trying to create that same sense of can't-look-away discomfort which makes people watch these carefully orchestrated displays of naked emotion that American afternoon shows peddle every day. The cast themselves have admitted to being simultaneously compelled and repelled by this kind of TV confessional.

'The blurring between fact and fiction is one of the areas we want to explore,' says Burn. 'We're looking for a live, theatrical equivalent. It's seeing how that type of programme with real people, baring their all, works when that's live, and the audience is not at home watching it on their own. We are raising questions about the whole thing.'

Pinson continues: 'How much are we aware of what we are watching, how much do we take it in? We're taking people's pain and putting it up there for entertainment. That's what was going on in Rome, which went from the games being two weeks a year to 30 weeks, with multiple killings instead of one. And it wasn't always that people had to be dragged to the Colosseum – there were a lot of willing participants.'

Well, the lions for a start...

Seizer (Fringe) Boilerhouse, Quad at University Old College (Venue 192), Edinburgh, 0131 220 5606. 9–25 Aug (not 15, 16, 23) 10pm, £3 (£5 for ticket offer, see Freeboarders, page 29)