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Review: Five sisters' window on the world

by David Nicholson on March 11, 2013 at 9:02 am



Union Jill, in warmer times. Photograph: Simon Watterson

Review: Songs, Stand Up and Stanzas from the Sisterhood
Union Jill, Kate Fox, Holly Taymar and Julia Deakin

Venue: Fibbers, Friday, March 8, 2013

York singer-songwriter Holly Taymar kicked off this early York Literature Festival event with six songs that set the evening's tone beautifully.

If the audience had been braced for performances of unrelenting polemic for this celebration of International Women's Day, then Holly was here to confound expectations. Her easygoing stage presence melted into humour and poignancy about life as a young woman, sharing with dirty housemates (The French One), getting ready to go out (Toes), longing (Keeping Time), and her new, anti-Valentine's Day song, as yet untitled, but which perfectly showed off a clear-voiced delivery that was reminiscent of a young Janis Ian.

A poised arrangement of Carole King's Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow matched the bittersweet lyrics with Holly's persona as a knowing ingenue. She rounded off effortlessly with Home, a love song to the city of York.



The stage was set for Julia Deakin. But this is where the gods of live performance and East Coast Rail - intervene. While Julia was stuck in a siding at Wakefield, the running order was derailed to bring the irrepressible - and very funny - Kate Fox



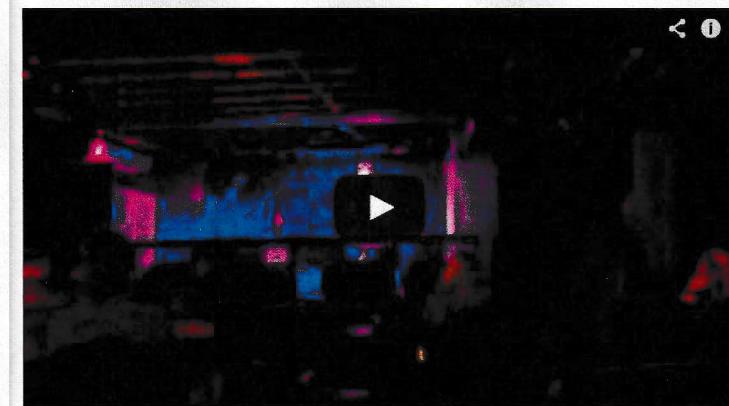
early to the stage.

Radio 4 and Saturday Live regular Kate can swoop between laugh-out-loud short and pithy comic verse verging on stand-up, with a wry take on life from a woman's standpoint and no less thoughtful, but more serious poetry. Tonight she played her joker, having decided that, as she couldn't see the audience from the stage, she would go for laughs... "that way I will know the audience is there".

Appropriately for the poet in residence of the Great North Run, Kate started with Run, a hilarious and angry rant prompted by the ignorant shout of a drive-by moron: "Run you fat cow".

Her feisty response immediately won us over.

Next came a gently funny, observational piece about how this very Radio 4 performer always says thank you to bus drivers. In the hands of a lesser writer, this seemingly slight subject matter would hardly support a one-liner, let alone a whole poem. But deftly handled by a gifted comic, the piece became an engaging snapshot of Englishness politesse.



The poems poured from her. Short Girlfriends was a partly self-deprecating put-down of a previous boyfriend for his previous amorous choices, encapsulating Kate's gift of finding the funny in everything.

There followed ramblings on Dr Who, and how Lots Of Planets Have A North, insight into the domestic life of Sylvia Plath, and a flight of fancy where she imagined Henry VIII in a rhyming battle with Eminem.

A high point in the 40-minute set found our Kate (and by now she really was "our Kate") playing her iPhone ukulele, in a bizarre but effective duet with an audience member at the sound desk, tapping his iPhone drumkit. They breezed through hilarious, abbreviated homages to Morrissey, Leona Lewis and Carly Simon, by way of The Queen.

If this makes the performance all sound somewhat motley and helter-skelter, well, it was... but this was carefully crafted, hilarious chaos - and we lapped it up.

Kate has certainly gone on my must-see-again list.



Stunning poetry... Julia Deakin

By now, Julia's train had arrived, and here she was, cutting a slighter figure, with the look of someone on a railway platform whose mind might be on other things. But that slightly other-worldly demeanour only momentarily concealed a poet of great power: sharp, unafraid, observational, unsentimental, truthful.

To have two such contrasting sets was exhilarating, and the enforced switch of

running order just heightened the stark brilliance of Julia's readings. She pulled no punches, opening with a heartbreak poem, When I Was Six, inspired by a photograph of a young Chinese girl from the first decade of the last century. The girl was a victim of foot-binding, a custom in which the ankles and feet of female children were mutilated in order to give them dainty feet, thought to be more attractive to men. It was performed as an angry dialogue between the girl, her father and family members and left this audience lost for words. A stunning opening.

Most poets might have opted for some leavening here, not so the redoubtable Julia Deakin. Having cranked up her audience, she hit home with, I Would Like To Forget, a harrowing poem about child sexual abuse (I can't bring myself to use that softening word, "paedophilia"). This was not your average poetry reading, guys and gals (well, mainly gals in this case), but you get the drift.

These two wince-inducing poems alone were worth the price of admission. Utterly breathtaking.

Julia's themes softened a little after that, and we were grateful for the remaining half dozen poems, including her commentary, in Without A Dog, on how hard it is to simply go out for a walk alone without attracting suspicion or fear.

There were words about Valentines, Baudelaire and prostitutes, spring and greenhouses, and Dreams Of A Doormat, in honour of a much-loved mother-in-law. But it is the opening poems that will live longest in the memory.

Only one thing jarred all night, and that was the bizarre choice of interval music. It was all blokie-folkie, which, remembering the theme, seemed inappropriate. If it was an ironic choice, it didn't work. Surely, a celebration of women, called for Dusty Springfield, Ella Fitzgerald, Mathilde Santing, Michelle Shocked, Iris DeMent, Lucinda Williams, Nanci Griffith, Patti Smith, even Dolly Parton.



By now we were ready for the charming Union Jill, already identified in YorkMix as one of the city's best acts.

Sharon Winfield and Helen Turner perfectly caught the spirit of the Women's Day theme, selecting story songs with women centre stage. Their sweet, close harmony vocals wrapped beautifully around a song about the women who flew Spitfires to the battlefield. Raven Mothers, came next, an offensive phrase coined in Germany, to refer to mothers who "abandon their nests" to pursue a career. One-time York resident Mad Alice, was also honoured in song, as were the political battles of the suffragettes, and feminist writer, Mary Wollstonecraft.

Union Jill are at their most powerful when their superb voices blend together; though not sisters, they evoke memories of the McGarrigles and the Roches, and at times the duo, more used to playing in intimate folk clubs, seemed a shade too far apart on the larger Fibbers stage. Their harmonising suggests closeness, and their good-natured stage banter reinforces the sisterliness of the performance, and they were a worthy headline to an excellent and varied night.

The main York Literature Festival programme runs from March 19-24. Download a PDF brochure here

Comments

Julia Deakin said on March 11, 2013 at 5:22 pm

Hi David,
 Thanks for this - so glad you liked it. Can I put you on a retainer? 😊
 Julia

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