

Review: Breathless

By Sara Lamerton

***Breathless* at Theatre Royal Plymouth**

Can you ever have too many things? Aren't we subconsciously taught that, in this consumer age, the more you own the better you are? That finding our intrinsic value in the items we buy is healthy. And, haven't we all, at one point or another, had to question our relationship to someone or something that isn't in our best interests? Of course we have. And that's exactly why *Breathless* by Plymouth's award-winning Laureate, Laura Horton, is so relatable from the outset. We all instinctively know that things can spiral out of control. That, under the right (or wrong) circumstances our passions can become obsessions; our private lives steeped in shame and guilt until we finally throw back the curtains and shine daylight into the hidden, musty corners.

Returning to TRP after winning a Fringe First at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival, *Breathless* follows Sophie (Madi MacMahon) on a journey of self-discovery whilst pursuing her dream of being a writer in London. When things don't go quite as planned, Sophie begins to take solace in her love of clothes. But it's not long before she's drowning under the weight of all that's amassed.

Pushing 40, Sophie moves back to Plymouth, yet a change of scenery cannot stop her being dragged further down by addiction. It's not only her physical and mental space that is overrun, but shame and secrets push potential new love away.

Written about Horton's personal experiences, *Breathless* empathetically illuminates how her hoarding started: from a love of a good ol' charity shop bargain, to never missing a designer sample sale, even at the cost of her writing dreams. Every outfit accumulated equalled a potential identity to escape into. Yet every purchase equated to a piece of her true self lost.

Sophie's inevitable psychological and romantic ups and downs continue. We're treated to eye watering tales from her dating escapades, as well as painful revelations about those she considered allies. Here is where MacMahon's exceptional acting skills are fully displayed; switching gracefully between characters, moods, and accents; seamlessly portraying those entangled in the journey. And, just as Sophie's hoarding peaks, so does her desire to embody a more authentic life. Opening up about being bisexual frees Sophie to explore aspects of herself that, up until that point, had been repressed. In turn, unravelling tattered threads which wound her pain tightly in place.

Breathless is an honest, personally poignant dive into an issue rarely discussed. Not only does it expertly highlight a first-hand experience, but guides us to consider the wider cultural issues surrounding this often misunderstood mental health problem.

In one hilarious scene, we're confronted by stereotypes easily found as thoughtless Messenger gifs: the hoarding old lady, buried under mountains of rubbish, all the while being looked at with cloaked disdain disguised as sympathy. And, although this reality certainly exists, *Breathless* explores a different perspective, one both relatable but dismissible if we continue to see hoarding only through the narrow primetime sensationalist 'How Clean Is Your House' lens.

For me, the takeaway from the excellent writing and captivating performance is how it could be anyone. Our issues may present differently, but many of us have found ourselves scouring for the next hit. The next identity. The next escape. Sometimes it takes being exposed by circumstances, or a conscious decision to dive deeper.

Breathless is one of those shows that enables us to be OK with not being OK. It's a celebration of the complexity of human nature, encouraging an honest and thoughtful dialogue about freeing ourselves from the weight of our own baggage.