

Fledgling Review

Imaginative, Mysterious, Vivid, Dark and Thought-provoking are some superlatives which could describe the radio play Fledgling. They set the play during a portion of the UK lockdown at the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Currently being broadcast via BBC Radio 4 has a unique take on some of the challenges faced. While the lockdowns are in place for the population of the UK to 'flatten the curve' and 'protect the NHS', this play provides an outside-in view examining some of our actions such as mask-wearing, toilet roll & food hoarding, and the overall stillness which embodies the year 2020.

The play is presented to the viewer primarily as an internal monologue or stream of consciousness as you hear thoughts from the primary protagonist. From the start, on hearing the ocean lapping over pebbles, it instantly draws you into the setting, though the context and potential narrative takes a little while longer to unfold.

The fledgling is beautifully played by Ruby Bentall. Best known for her roles in Lark Rise to Candleford and the 2015 BBC adaptation of Poldark, Bentall engages the listeners from the very first scene on the beach. She makes you care, so much so, that immediately after listening to the play, I went to refill the bird feeders in my garden.

Fledgling is Sami Ibrahims debut radio play. Ibrahims, who is the writer-in-residence at Shakespeare's Globe and one of the Genesis Almeida New Playwrights, brings a unique bird's-eye view of our pandemic ravaged world today. He is best known for his humorous futuristic play 'Two Palestinians go dogging' which won the Theatre Uncut's Political Play-writing Award in 2019 and despite Fledgling having a dark and desperate air to it there are some amusing aspects, such as the surreal description of chips as "chopped up potato" and the moments the play shifts from pure

inner monologue to include a mixture of Charlie Brown-esq pseudo dialogue from a human attempting to help.

As the journey unfolds, the description the fledgling gives to humans as she comes across them is one of 'Long Legs, orange skin and no feathers', which brings to mind the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* by Michelle Paver where one of her protagonists calls his companion 'tall tail-less'. It's these minor details which give the fledgling play an edge of realism, as if you truly are taking a bird's-eye view of humanity.

There are many themes running through this play. It feels like it is an examination of coming of age with cleverly woven elements of abandonment, loss and hunger. Looking closer, there are parallels to the emotional roller coaster of the human population as we navigate the tricky waters of this pandemic. A poignant moment during the search for her father, the fledgling flies over a landfill and voices her confusion: "These long legs, they stand in queues waiting for food. They store it in boxes. They shout at us. They protect the food. They starve us of it. Then they turn around and dump it." This unique descriptive display of behaviour has as much to say about the way we treat animals and birds as it does the way our very existence has turned into a set of societal behaviours towards each other and our consumption habits.

Towards the end of the play, as the birds hunger begins to drive their behaviour, you get a glimpse into the potential consequences. During the fledgling's search for her missing father, she comes across a landfill. At this point the narrative turns more towards a set of dialogues between the various birds all trying to survive. Lured away on the premise that her father is just around the corner, the play takes a darker turn as the fledgling meets one of the antagonists, 'Twitcher' played by Carl Prekopp. As

the meeting and dialogue unfold, there is a hint at potential ongoing cannibalism as each bird in turn, starving, attempts to survive by any means necessary. As the play draws towards a close, they provide us with a fascinating image of the birds gathering on the windowsill, looking in at the human givers and takers. This provides an eerie backdrop akin to the 1963 film, 'The Birds' by Alfred Hitchcock.

In this tumultuous and contentious time of lockdowns and other restrictions being imposed to control a global pandemic, most people are trying to find something to while away the days. I would heartily recommend this wonderfully written and performed piece of modern times art.

745 Words (expected...750 Words +/-10% (675-825) not including title)

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