

THEATRE



Director: Richard Gregory

Rooms with your view

FRANK, Newcastle Playhouse

A JOURNEY into the unknown through a series of rooms. No stage, apparently no script. Audience level: one. I'm the guest of Richard Gregory, who conceived and directed the idea, designer Simon Banham, dramaturgy and smell design by Renny O'Shea plus actors from The Northern Stage Ensemble.

Each night 45 people are asked to wander off on their own to explore ten rooms with honesty. I take a pen and notebook plus a comforting copy of The Northern Echo.

Overcoming the determination not to make a fool of yourself takes time, but my natural nosiness and attempts at joviality soon re-surface. I automatically collect names of room occupants: names make news (discuss). Alex, Peter and Jim survive my early onslaught. Then there's a people-empty room containing a chair and violin where I did unspeakable things with a bow. Room 5 unnerves me with an image of illness or death but Francisco's ("like in San Francisco") room cheers me and further on a television set constantly shows a seascape. "Is it stuck on long-wave?" I ask, and a fellow journey-taker bursts out laughing.

Peter and Mark act as helpers here as the experience increasingly feels like The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe meets Alice in Wonderland. A friendly smell is Renny's soup – other smells, I discover later, are not so friendly and mostly male. Renny is surprised that I've heard her name before. I decide not to reveal that it was the name of the old workhouse site in the city where I used to live.

There is a convivial air towards the end and my Northern Echo proves to be of invaluable assistance – don't tell the editor, but I needed it to sit on and then loaned it to someone else for the same purpose. Outside, I am reunited with my coat as journeyman number 118. A woman, smoking a cigarette, discovers I'm a journalist and says: "Do you know, I thought you were one of the actors."

Uplifted by that fine compliment, I reflect on an hour-long odyssey which I'm desperate to discuss with others, yet I've agreed to keep my experiences a secret. Even the event's pamphlet is hidden in your coat before you leave. This isn't in the same league as Jules Verne, but I can understand the appeal of making such a journey of self-discovery... it's Changing Rooms with knobs on.

Viv Hardwick

FRANK continues until June 9.

Evenings from 6. Tickets: £3-£8. Box Office: 0191-230 5151