



AMAZING GRACE

Local theatre company Quarantine's new work looks at those crucial moments in life

If there was an award for most arresting poster of the year, *Grace* - the latest from Manchester-based Quarantine - would be a shoo-in. It's not every day of the week you see a Lidl shopping bag floating in balletic fashion along an empty beach.

"For the last four shows, we've used images that place something really banal and domestic in a landscape," explains Richard Gregory, one half of the company's artistic directorship alongside Renny O'Shea. "To me, there's something ugly about it but also beautiful and graceful. If you squint at it, it looks like the setting sun."

How to describe the work of this unique company? Since forming in 1998, Quarantine have developed a reputation for uncovering the extraordinary in the everyday. All the company's work is developed from the experiences and histories of the performers involved (some professional, some not), lending a strong emotional conviction to each

project. In last year's *White Trash*, Gregory worked with young working-class males from Manchester council estates; with *Butterfly* - staged in Glasgow this spring - he surrounded a real-life family with the trappings of an anniversary celebration.

"It's a two-step process," explains the former associate director at Newcastle's Northern Stage. "I have a broad idea of what I want to explore, which is always something specifically personal for me. With *White Trash*, I was interested in what life was like for young men a generation younger than me. I was 17 when Thatcher came to power. The lads I worked with on *White Trash* weren't even born then, but have been left with her legacy."

Grace - which features live music from up-and-comers The Permissive Society - finds the director in a more philosophical mode, the result of turning 40 a couple of years ago - an event he views with a sanguine detachment:

"I started becoming conscious in my mid-30s that I'd arrived at a place in life I hadn't predicted. I think I expected to be married with a wife and two children, a nice house in the suburbs and a job that paid a decent salary. I'm nowhere near close to that."

This, then, is a show that looks at those moments, tiny and monumental, that permanently change our lives - for better or worse. Gregory cites the death of his father as being the most significant in his own.

"My dad died when I was 18, a fortnight before I went to university," he says. "I went to study economics - I wanted to be an accountant - but I failed everything. After a year, I switched to a drama degree. Looking back, I can see that if my dad hadn't died, I'd probably be an accountant today."

Up until 18 months ago, Gregory ran Quarantine from Amsterdam, flying to Manchester every few weeks to rehearse - a distance that helped him

view the city from a fresh perspective, and not necessarily a sepia-tinged one.

"I'd walk down from Piccadilly Station and start to notice the negatives: the aggression, the filth and the sense of dysfunction."

Not a description you'll find in the local property supplement. In that case, why come back at all?

"Because I feel like I'm connected to Manchester. The things I've described are true of cities everywhere, which has also fed into the experience of making *Grace*. How do we deal with the complexity of sharing the same space with people who have very different ideas about what life is about? That's a brilliantly impossible area to explore."

Accountancy's loss is theatre's gain.

STEVE TIMMS

Grace, 11-22 October @ Contact Theatre, Oxford Road, City centre (274 0600). www.qtine.com