

HUXLEY

REVIEW: DNA, THEATRE INQ

by Nathan Toll(<http://huxley.press/author/nathan-toll/>)



Friendships quickly establish, as we open on Jan (Faduma Ali) and Marcia (Keely Pronk) gossiping about the event that sets in motion the entire production. They quickly turn to Phil (Jacob McCarthy) and as a result, Leah (Elyse Phelan) for help. We then meet head honcho of the schoolyard Joanne (Rita Neale), who is in the midst of calming her closest followers Danni (Victoria Fowler/ Megan Heferen) and Lou (Laura Pastega/ Gemma Shield). Enter Richard (Harlee

Timms) who used to be head honcho, followed by girlfriend Cathy (Emma Benson). Things escalate. Phil concocts a calculated plan to fix everything. Book your tickets to find out whether the plan works.

Bridge Project students(<http://huxley.press/2019/04/18/the-bridge-project-showcases-daring-new-actors/>) are no strangers to Theatre iNQ shows, appearing as both ensemble members and leads in many previous productions – but it was incredibly exciting to see them spread their wings with a show all their own. And what a show it was!

Theatre iNQ does an incredible job of training the next generation of local performers, with members of their Bridge Project popping up in almost every production. But the company's latest offering, *DNA*, features

a cast of **only** 'Bridges' – and you won't want to turn away for a second.

From the second the lights dim, there can be no doubt where or when we are being taken: the techy, gossipy modern high school world. With actors' faces dimly lit by phones from the moment they walk on stage, you would be quick to expect the performance to comment on social media, relationships, and bullying – and you wouldn't be wrong.

Elyse Phelan as Leah was a phenomenal standout. You couldn't count on both hands and feet the number of emotions expressed on her face in the space of a single monologue: Leah is a thousand-words-a-minute character, questioning a lot of things in life all while vying for one person's attention, and Elyse plays this hilariously well. From her infectious laughter to her physicality and expressions, it was impossible not to feel everything as Leah did.

Phil was a complete contrast, played by Jacob McCarthy. Silent until completely necessary, I have no idea how Jacob managed to keep a straight face as the hilarious chaos of an Elyse Phelan monologue played out around him. But he did: eating his way through the food groups, and biding his time until things escalated before shuffling into action and asserting his control – and when Jacob spoke, we all listened.

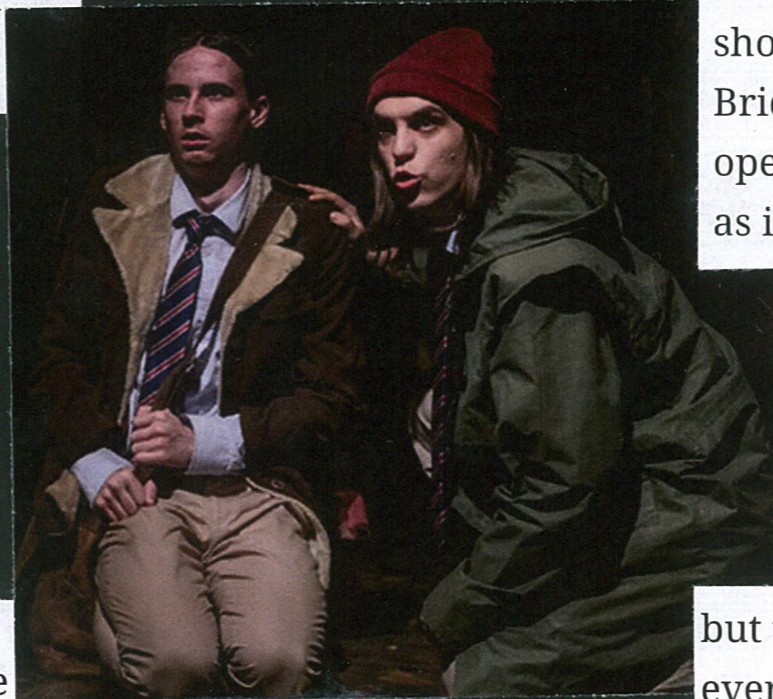
Byron Howells has played such a variety of characters in his few short years with Theatre iNQ, and Brian is yet another: for a character who starts quiet and timid, Brian's evolution throughout the performance is sudden and heartbreaking. Byron gives an incredible performance and leaves nothing in the tank – the audience is taken on a rapid descent from laughter to tears.

Keely Pronk and Faduma Ali (both *The Vagina Monologues* (<http://huxley.press/2018/11/22/yes-yes-oh-yes/>)) as Marcia and Jan do a hilarious job of progressing the narrative. Marcia is always the first to know gossip, which means her bestie is always second in the know – even if it does take a while for Marcia to explain it to Jan, in typical daft Geordie schoolgirl style. Just as one problem seems to be resolving, Marcia hears of the next development – and no matter how serious it may be, Keely and Faduma's accents and over-the-topness lead the audience into the next scene laughing.

Harlee Timms as Richard and Emma Benson as Cathy were the imperfect high school sweethearts – at first seeming like the typical couple, but fracturing as the story unfolds. Emma's performance in particular, and her character's development throughout the show, offers a scary reflection of just how far some people would go for their 15 minutes of fame. Emma and Harlee always give exceptional performances, with *DNA* now added to the list as possibly their best yet.

Rita Neale's intimidating Joanne barely lifts a finger to scare others into silence. Rita played this role beautifully, verging on the precipice of intimidation and fragility, as we witness her spiralling towards a breakdown. Rita had an incredible presence on stage, and I was left wishing we saw more of Joanne throughout the show.

The Bridge Project fosters talent not just on stage, but behind the scenes: with second year Bridgee [Heath Roberts](http://huxley.press/2019/02/14/next-gen-heath-roberts/) (<http://huxley.press/2019/02/14/next-gen-heath-roberts/>) designing the lighting on top of being stage manager. Heath could easily call it a job well done after the first few minutes of the show, with an incredible lighting plot and seamless transitions setting an intense mood and fast pace for the show ahead. Heath is joined for this production by first year Bridgee Xara Holmes as assistant stage manager and sound operator – with the performance's soundscape as impressive as its lighting.



The set, designed by Brendan O'Connor, was a masterpiece in itself; Direction by Terri Brabon was smoother than jam on a waffle, and the makeup (you'll know it when you see it) was out of this world. There were times the show felt almost *too* well-rehearsed or where an accent slipped a little,

but this is splitting hairs – I would gladly watch this show every night for the rest of its season.

The lighting, sound and blocking all combine to produce something extremely powerful: at times your heart is stopped, your breath is caught, and you're hanging on every word a character is delivering – and at other times, you feel as if you're front row at a Bonobo exhibit at the zoo, with pure chaos unfolding before you in all the best ways.