

Theatre

Gutted

It may seem a contradiction to describe a solo performance as a dialogue but *Gutted* is precisely that: an invitation to talk. Based upon the actress Liz Richardson's experiences as a young person living with ulcerative colitis, the play—co-produced by The Conker Group theatre collective and HOME, Manchester's centre for the contemporary arts, and supported by IA: The Ileostomy & Internal Pouch Support Group—tackles headlong the stigma attached to talking about chronic illness, particularly when it concerns the bowels.

As Liz explains: "It's about me sharing what I know and not being afraid". An auto-immune condition that inflames the colon and rectum, ulcerative colitis produces symptoms that are about as humiliating as they come—crippling abdominal pain, diarrhoea full of blood and pus—and a life of toilet dashes and potent medication. If *Gutted* can be a hoped for "vessel for chats", then Liz's bravery—indeed, her shamelessness—in revisiting some of the pain will have been worthwhile. Of course success, or otherwise, boils down to whether the play works as theatre.

Moments of levity betray the origins of *Gutted* as a stand-up routine. Under the guidance of director Tara Robinson, however, the skit has developed into a well-intentioned assault on the senses. The performance space is decorated by three toilets. A line of vases with wilting bouquets stretches along the rear, recalling hospital bedside cabinets. A pinewood table and chairs are set to one side upon which are hung get-well cards. Most effectively, a large screen overlooks the space, initially looping cherished televisual memories of carefree times before Liz's diagnosis.

We are confronted by a world of cramps and attacks of diarrhoea, of long periods of hospitalisation, and of invasive procedures. "This shouldn't be painful...but it will be", Liz is told as a probe's eye view of a colonoscopy is projected onto the screen behind her. At one point, she literally lays herself bare, stripping down to her underwear ostensibly for an anatomy lesson. Her quality of life compromised to such an extent that surgery is her "next and only option", she draws on her abdomen the surgical procedure for a temporary ileo-anal, or "J-" pouch, fixing the rubber stoma and bag to her side that will become her companions for 3 months as the stitches and staples in her gut heal. Meanwhile the screen loops scenes of domesticity, of a family cooking and eating together normally.

Ketchup and brown sauce are squirted on the floor of the performance area and liberally smeared over limbs and

torso, the mingling of red and brown a sombre, visceral demonstration of the degrading nature of Liz's illness. Her description of having a catheter fitted "down there" by a friend who attempts to make small talk is just as frank...and blackly comic.

Liz is, of course, an actress and in *Gutted* she is more than cipher for a chronic condition. Her invocation of multiple characters to propel her story—"Goodhand", "Old Elsie", "Softly Spoken Nurse In Crocs", "Dad", "Stoma", amongst others—is captivating. Her periodic forays into the audience bearing cake or beer to entice them on stage to read aloud comments from friends and family was particularly endearing. I'm sure that I wasn't alone in cheering later moments of triumph: finding love, sacking her stoma, and the benefits of probiotic therapy. The menace of pouchitis notwithstanding, there is considerable uplift to Liz's story. She ends the play by cleansing her soiled body, assembling a shrine to her beloved yoghurt and expressing her gratitude to those who made, and continue to make, a difference to her life.

In 2011 the (then) Manchester United footballer Darren Fletcher was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. Having initially stayed silent, he decided to make it public knowledge: it was "such a relief...[the] best thing I did", he said. It's good to talk and *Gutted*, not least in its giving Liz a cathartic forum to relive her pain, is to be applauded for promoting this particular conversation in a life-affirming way.

Andrew Bell

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By Liz Richardson
Performed at HOME Manchester on May 20–21, 2016, Oxford Playhouse, Oxford, on June 25, 2016, and St James's Hospital, Leeds on July 2, 2016
<http://www.theconkergroup.co.uk/>

