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Dispatches from The Fringe - Hearts on Fire generates serious heat

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Hearts on Fire
Peculiusstage

Hearts on Fire

Rating: ★★★★★

What you think, you bring about. Milking this self-evident piece of new age wisdom, former Tulsan native and motivational speaker, James Arthur Ray managed to convince approximately 60 people to part with \$10,000 each in 2009. In return he would teach them how to become spiritual warriors following 36 hours fasting and a life altering vision quest in a Native American styled, sweat lodge in Arizona. Eighteen people suffered injuries. Three died.

Based on these true life occurrences Adam Usden has cleverly constructed *Hearts on Fire*, a script which uses original testimonies to try reconstruct the events surrounding this tragedy. In the hand of a lesser company it could have all gone horribly wrong. But Peculiusstage have managed to create a truly immersive piece of theatre that brings the audience across the fourth wall and into the action without the usual device of audience participation.

Played in the round in a replica smoke lodge that caters to approximately thirty people, *Hearts on Fire* begins with the charismatic James, wonderfully realized by Nigel Barber, complimenting the audience on having the courage to take part in his spiritual warrior program. Later when we meet

James' long suffering assistants, played superbly by Sasha Fisher and Jonathan Milshaw, we begin to discover that the wizard behind the curtain is really a crass, insensitive and deluded megalomaniac. Throughout Barber is riveting as James, shifting effortlessly and convincingly between the man and his mask. When the other participants on the retreat arrive, James can barely conceal his loathing for them. But they are always impressed by his charm, in fear of his disapproval and in awe of his confidence. Glamoured by James' they follow him blindly down his spiritual warrior path to their deaths.

Delivering strong performances, David Scott Roberts, Julie Addy, Fiona Whitelaw and Jessica Martenson as James' cursed followers round out this excellent cast. Direction by Ali Boag is top drawer, keeping the action moving, the focus where it needed to be and excellently negotiating the demands and difficulties of the round. Adam Usden's script is sharp and insightful, even if constrained by the nature of its verbatim approach. With fictional interpretations of recorded events needing to always conform to the facts, the possibility of creatively exploring why these people undertook this journey is never adequately pursued. We know they're there, we never really know why. And we can no longer ask them.

Hearts on Fire is an incredibly brave and worthwhile piece of theatre that scores top marks in all departments. In *Hearts on Fire* you don't feel like you're going to die, but you do feel something of the horror and claustrophobia of the sweat lodge. Yet the real horror is revealed in the smug and self-delusional James who preys on the weakness of others, often with dire consequences. Except for James himself. Following a trial in 2011, James Arthur Ray was sentenced to two years in prison for three counts of negligent homicide. He is due for release next year.

Hearts on Fire plays daily at CNova, India Buildings until August 27th. Doors open at 4.50 p.m. and 7.50. p.m. Tickets range from £9.50 to £11.50.



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