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Humanity and Heartache in The Fens

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Ours Was The Fen Country by Still House - Dan Canham
Will-Hanke

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Rating: ★★★★☆

The Fens in East Anglia is a flat, bleak landscape with a long history. Formerly marshland, drained centuries ago, The Fens have since become home to horse breeders, eel catchers and farmers, to name but a few, in a landscape renowned for its bleakness and the richness of its soil known locally as black gold. It's a closed community by and large, secretive, distrustful of outsiders, with a humour and stoicism hardened by the elements. But it's a proud community too. One which is rapidly disappearing. As is the land itself.

Developed over two years by former DV8 member and Dublin Fringe, Best Male Performer Award winner, Dan Canham, *Ours Was The Fen Country* attempts to give voice to the lives and times of the people of The Fens, the changes they've faced and those they continue to face. Staged in a minimalist set comprised primarily of chairs, a table with a laptop and speakers, some boards angled towards the rear and a tall, wooden beam, *Ours Was The Fen Country* relays the words and stories of the people of The Fens which Canham and his company, Still House, gathered over

the two year period. The result is a stark, moving performance which captures a people with a shared past resigned to hoping for the best for the future.

Performers Ian Morgan, Neil Paris, Tilly Webber and Canham himself expertly evoke the pride, humour and stoicism of The Fen community. Directly retelling their tales at times, lips syncing to the original recordings at others, they appear as conduits to the words and voices of a community reflecting on itself. Movement, though, was where they really shone, with short routines that brought forth the deeper resonances behind the words. A series of tap like movements were exquisitely danced out to speech rhythms. Tilly Webber, marionette like, twisted and snapped to a women's tale of her life in The Fens, bringing forth the fear, frailty and uncertainty behind her words. In truth, movement was the most successful part of the performance. The stories, while engaging for the most part, took on a narrow focus that movement entered deeper into, begging the question what more movement might have yielded.

Canham's choreography allowed each performer freedom for individual expression. Less successful was the projected images on a white, cloth screen, attempting to convey the bleakness of The Fens. The limited soundscape and music was a brave choice, evoking a sense of starkness throughout while setting up the final, life affirming release at the end.

The burning questions how this community survived so long and why someone would choose to live there is given its perfect answer in the final [dance](#) sequence. Taking in the width and breadth of the stage, all four performers move with joy and delight over the vocalised "yes" of The Fens' story tellers. Yet as the light finally fades, the final image is of a single, tall wooden beam, once completely buried in Fen soil, jutting upwards into the darkness. A reminder that The Fens' soil is rapidly disappearing. That The Fens may possibly disappear within the next fifty years. The sense of joy is painfully tempered by the realisation of what might soon be lost forever.

Ours Was The Fen Country is a labour of love with some beautiful moments that pays tribute to a community and a landscape on the verge of possible extinction. Throughout *Ours Was The Fen Country*, the pull of the past and that of the future is always present, creating its own palpable tension. If memory prevails, nostalgia is never succumbed to, rather a stoic view towards the future remains, part resignation, part hope. Yet it is the pride, dignity, humour and humanity of its people that truly resonates in what is a memorable and moving production.

Ours Was The Fen Country ran as part of the Dublin Dance Festival at The [Project Arts Centre](#).



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