SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT
Frank Films
Queen's Theatre - The Lab
Until 11 Mar 2018

Reviewed by, Thomas Filsell.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” attempts to deal with too many issues, too many stories, too many lives. It has nineteen teenaged characters, each one dealing with puberty blues and their own trials and tribulations, each with their own backstory, but none with what seemed like more than superficial and caricatured personality. Each character is nothing more than an excuse for dealing with one of a number of the typical problems one might suspect a young person to struggle with growing up in a contemporary western society.

Too often are there six, ten, or more people on stage, pretending to chat, play cards, or do each other’s hair, while one or two of the characters speak, interact and tell their particular tale. Too much is going on at once for us to focus on any of the individuals, and most of what is said is lost on us as a result.

The play tries to deal with serious themes like depression, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, sexuality, homosexuality and discrimination, but each issue is introduced briefly and is barely breached before the scene changes and we’re on to the next one. We in the audience have no chance to connect or empathise with any of the characters, and we’re never really sure with whom to side or if there is a story to follow or a deeper message to convey. There is, essentially, a series of vignettes, a series of unrelated stories, connected only by their being physically tied to a community centre all the young people are required to attend for various token reasons, cobbled together for the sake of filling out the time for a full length play. The action could be condensed into an hour or less, and one, two, or three of the issues and character’s stories focused on for a more taught, relatable, empathetic, enjoyable show.

The only times the story succeeded was when there were just one or two actors on stage, who had time to go into their story, their reason for being there, and when we weren’t distracted by over the top comedy, laughing, aggression, or overacting in the background, such as when the young man playing a boy living with autism had a chance to talk with a sympathetic girl named Betty and explain his backstory and some of his quirks.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” could be a deeply moving, thought-provoking, important piece of theatre. Unfortunately, it tries too hard at too many things and the end result feels hasty and superficial. Too many cooks spoiled the broth.

Rating: 1 star (out of 5)