

Riverrun, The Shed, Review

A one-woman show inspired by Finnegan's Wake may sound daunting, but Olwen Fouere's bold drama is as funny as it is exhilarating

★★★★★



Olwen Fouere's one-woman show is inspired by Finnegan's Wake Photo: Colm Hogan

By Jane Shilling

When my colleague Christopher Howse wrote recently about the charm of unread [books](#), he recalled that the maverick Francophile Professor Richard Cobb claimed never to have read Proust. Cobb's admission has morphed into a perennial competition for the most outrageous literary omission. Popular classics such as *Pride and Prejudice* attract the most kudos, while James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* gets you nowhere. Anyone who claims to have read it is either a Joyce scholar, or confusing it with *Hereward the Wake*.

Rather cheerily, the actress Olwen Fouere, whose solo show is based on Joyce's novel, admits that she has "never read the book in any linear fashion - instead I had dived into snippets by opening it at random".

What attracted Fouere to the work was the quality that the novelist Michael Chabon describes as “Joyce’s helplessness in the face of language, his glossolalia, the untrammelled riverine flow of words and wordplay in which [he] plunged, and swam, and drowned”.

Working backwards from the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” section of the Wake (which sounds tantalisingly comprehensible if you listen to the YouTube recording of Joyce reading his own work), Fouere traces the river back to its source in a quasi-improvisatory performance characterized by Joycean fluidity.

Fouere, a striking figure with a dancer’s whippy physique and a waterfall of platinum hair, watches silently as the audience files in. An abstract pattern of ripples is powdered on the stage, which is empty but for a sinuously curved microphone.

She begins her show with a guttural keening, like the sound of Siberian throat singing, before moving into an animated narrative in which fragments of meaning bob like floating debris. Her physical presence is arrestingly expressive - her long arms and large hands give her delicate frame a faintly grotesque aspect, like a goblin, or Charlie Chaplin’s little tramp. At times her monologue has the ethereal quality of Tolkien’s Elvish language; at others it takes on an unmistakable bawdy.

The absence of readily accessible meaning is a formidable challenge for an audience: even Not I, Beckett’s disembodied dramatic howl of anguish, is easier to follow. Joyceans will love it, of course. But for those of us who have repeatedly stopped at the fence of Finnegans Wake, Fouere’s bold, funny and eloquent drama might just be life-changing: I left The Shed charmed, exhilarated and convinced that the time had come to tackle Joyce’s great masterpiece of intractable modernism.

Until 22 March 2014. Tickets: 020 7452 3000; nationaltheatre.org.uk