



INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Having been moved and impressed by the MADC's *Image of an Unknown Young Woman*, Jo Caruana simply wishes more people could have seen this strong and cutting-edge production.

We've become a generation of mindless scrollers. As we sift through information – on Facebook, Twitter or news sites – we scroll, effortlessly gliding our forefinger across images of picturesque weddings, brand new babies, asphyxiated dogs and terrorist beheadings.

Somehow it all gets sorted and stored in our brains. Some items do stall us of course, perhaps long enough for us to 'like' them or 'share' them, but most get glossed over in an instant. We file pictures of best friends' birthdays away in our minds... somewhere beside cute litters of kittens eating their breakfast and bombed hospitals in Syria where the roof has caved in onto cots below.

We experience information overload... the good, the bad and the horrific all merge into mere moments that please, displease or (rarely these days) shock us, and, just like that, they are forgotten.

Elinor Cook's play *Image of an Unknown Young Woman*, which was recently staged by the MADC at the Blue Box Theatre, begins by poking fun at the way social media has come to condition us. It opens with a sharp choral scene (played by Antony Edridge, Joseph Zammit and Steffi Thake) that points fingers at the millions who sit behind computer screens waging war at far-off enemies. "Like!" "Share!" "Post!" come the voices, vying for attention on the jam-packed highways of our cyber lives. "Share this please, we have to raise awareness about this issue today!" they chide, knowing full well that they will have another cause to badger us with tomorrow. But let's be honest, we all do it.

Set during anti-government protests in a nondescript location at an unspecified time

(though obviously recently, as the cast carry smartphones at all times) the play moves quickly from the get-go. Ali (Christian Galea) just happens to be filming when an unnamed young woman in a yellow dress is shot. As her blood pours onto the streets, the video – which Ali uploads on a whim, encouraged by his girlfriend Leyla (Maria Pia Meli) – goes viral. It seems the woman in the yellow dress has captured mass attention – she is pretty enough, the video is gory enough and the cause seems worthy enough. Soon the whole world is watching.

As the woman in the yellow dress is transferred to hospital to recover, chaos ensues. Amid it we meet Yasmin (Rebecca Camilleri) who is wandering the frenzied streets looking for her mother, who popped to the shops two days ago and hasn't been seen since. She is desperate, lost and searching for answers. To her, her mother is her world, but to the rest of the world her mother is just one of the many missing people out there. So why should they care? She will have to stand in line and wait her turn like the rest of them.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, Candace (Nanette Brimmer) is doing her bit for the cause by donating to a charity led by Nia (Erika Muscat). The two form an uncomfortable friendship, as Nia encourages Candace to do more and more to help those far-off strangers. As the play goes on, we're left wondering whether Nia really is fighting a worthy cause, or simply using the horror of it to ply money from an increasingly guilt-tripped Candace. This raises another eyebrow – do we ever really know where the money we donate to these causes actually ends up?

And that's just one of the many questions that we find ourselves asking as the production whizzes on – it is fast-paced, edgy and gruelling to watch. Director Philip Leone Ganado has reeled us in from the start. His cast is slick and the production pacy, while the script is punchy enough to eke its audience (well, most of them) away from their phones for its duration – and that's no easy task these days.

The cast work effortlessly as an ensemble, milling in and out of the dynamic-yet-simple set that was managed by Christian Mifsud, with lighting design by Anthony Bezzina. The chorus is enjoyably robust, pulling the punches with every line.

Working as a trio is no easy task but they achieve this brilliantly and move the plot along between the tight snippets that take place in varying locations – Candace's living room, a hospital, a café and a TV studio.

Yasmin is the character that interacts most with the chorus – bumping into them in the street and begging them for help at the clinic. Camilleri plays her to a tee, infusing the perfect amount of panic and hope, while keeping her presentation natural and unaffected. She is exceptionally strong, amid a cast of very solid performers.

Brimmer and Muscat, too, were watchable as their relationship strengthened and then threatened to break down. Brimmer really fit the role perfectly and she was every bit the twee English lady desperate to make a difference. I enjoyed her rendition tremendously.

Finally, Galea and Meli were also very much in synch as they played out a couple going from strength to turmoil. Their story hit home the most – one minute they were proudly uploading a video they thought could make a difference, the next they were being threatened for their lives by faceless predators. It is a journey that can't have been easy to portray, but they did so splendidly.

Looking back on the *Image of an Unknown Young Woman* as a whole, it is hard to pinpoint an aspect of this play that I didn't enjoy – except for its poor attendance. Shows of this calibre – a brave choice by the MADC – deserve to be seen by so many more than the trickle that appeared. As standards continue to be set by productions like this, let's hope the audiences will follow.



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