

# HIGHLANDS STUDENTS HIT THE STAGE IN EDINBURGH



(L-R) Liam Walsh, Marianna Martin & James Lockheart during rehearsals for

This summer, three Highlands students, James Lockheart (Year 13), Liam Walsh (year 13) and Marianna Martin (Year 11) were given the opportunity to perform with Worlds End Productions at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the world's largest arts festival. The cast were made up of 10 young people aged between 15 to 18 from the Enfield area, many of whom attend the Pauline Quirke Academy of Performing Arts (PQA).

The play, 'Extremism' by Anders Lustgarten, was directed by our Drama teacher, Mr McGinley. Set in an average secondary school classroom, a group of students are stunned when their classmate, Jamal, is taken away by the police as a part of the government's PREVENT programme against the spread of extremism and radicalisation. The class are then left alone, shocked by what they've just witnessed and delve into increasingly divisive conversations focusing on the core

themes of fear, racial prejudice and "wanting to feel safe". The play raises questions about the negative effects of well-meaning initiatives such as PREVENT and how they can actually feed the polarisation of today's society.

Rehearsals began in late June and into the summer holidays. Throughout our intensive rehearsal programme, the cast, worked in a professional environment to fully develop their characters and to fully grasp the relevance of the play and the issues it explores to their own everyday experiences in school.

In Edinburgh, the cast stayed in a student flat 20 minutes' walk from the venue on the Royal Mile at the heart of the Fringe Festival. The daily routine consisted of waking up, morning runs (for those who chose to), a vocal warm up lead by a different member of the cast each day, before hitting the Royal Mile to promote the show. This was an important part of the day as often only a small number of tickets would have been pre-booked. A lot of hard graft on the Mile ensured good audiences each day. This was a huge challenge for all of us, not just because we were competing against hundreds of other companies trying to promote their shows but also the frequent rejection of their efforts by the passing public. We quickly found that it was all good experience and provided an extra level of satisfaction after each performance.

Following flyering on the Mile, there was just time for a quick lunch before making our way to the venue at Riddles Court at the top of the Royal Mile, in the shadow of Edinburgh's famous castle. The response that we received from this show was nothing short of overwhelming, and it was wonderful to see that people were



genuinely moved by this story and they left the theatre thinking about the issues raised. One performance was attended by representatives from the National Union of Students who were so impressed that they stayed behind to talk to the cast and even spoke about the possibility of touring schools with this particular show, since it was so relevant to teenagers across the UK.

In terms of professional reviews, the show received a five-star review from the 'British Theatre Guide' and a four-star review from 'EdFringe Review' which everyone was absolutely thrilled with.



*A strong cast give an exciting, believable performance that grips your attention from the moment it begins.*

**British Theatre Guide (5 stars)**

*"An excruciatingly nail-biting watch"...*

**EdFringe Review (4 stars)**

Away from the show, the cast bonded quickly into a strong Family unit, despite the fact that they had not all known each other prior to working on the show. Living together for a week, cooking and cleaning as well as sampling the many other theatre and comedy shows at the Fringe as well as the weird and wonderful street performers. The only regret was not finding the free to use pool table at the student halls!



The cast of 'Extremism' with Charlie Quirke (Birds of a Feather' who was appearing in 'Our Boys' at the same venue)

The relevance of the play itself to the cast's daily lives in school and the wider social challenges it explores were the elements of the script that caused us and audiences to find such strong engagement with the piece. Topics surrounding those of discrimination, extremism and the threats of modern terrorism are ones that people are meant to be scared of, and are very often scared to even discuss them, but the play does exactly that and puts those issues at the forefront of the action, with bold, hard-to-watch scenes to match. We'd hoped that the

play would be able to perhaps change the opinions of those that came to watch, or at the very least make people realise that these are issues that we shouldn't be afraid to talk about when they are increasingly relevant to everyday life.

A short documentary was made of our experience which you can watch on Worlds End Productions YouTube channel <https://youtu.be/CZuHliaTfDY>

We are so grateful for the opportunity given to us by Mr McGinley and Worlds End Productions London and would like to thank him for the experience that he has given us. Even if our acting careers go horribly at least we will have this unforgettable week to hold on to forever.

*Article by James Lockheart and Liam Walsh (Year 13)*