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How accurately is mental health represented in Theatre?

An analysis of modern playwrights and productions.

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This dissertation seeks to explore how Mental Health is represented well in British Theatre, through plot, characters and Design. I will draw particular examples from productions of Milly Thomas' *Dust*, Lucy Caldwell's *Leaves* and Donna Franceschild's '*Takin Over the Asylum*'. Mental health has had an increase in representation within theatre over the past few years in line with the increased media coverage and public acceptance. Mental Health is significant in our current world, as it is a less taboo subject than it was a few decades ago. People who were diagnosed with any type of mental health illness were always viewed as different or weak. Mental Health can also be referred to as hidden disability as people may not show booming symptoms of having poor mental health for example those who may appear happy at school, college or work may just be putting on act and trying to remain strong as they don't want to seek help as they don't want to seem or appear as work. But now more and more people are open about having Mental health and those who are open about it are seen as brave, as their stories will encourage others to seek some guidance. One way that mental health is represented well is through British theatre as theatre is a way that the actors can create a relationship and bond between their audiences. British theatre helps explore all different kinds of mental health and shows everyone that just because people say they're okay doesn't mean they are.

TAKIN' OVER THE ASYLUM - written by Donna Franceschild and performed in 2013

The play explores a character named Campbell Bain who resides in St Jude's Asylum in Glasgow. He is 19 years old and suffers from bipolar disorder (formally known as manic depression) Around 1.3 million people have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder within the UK and so is prevalent in today's society. Bipolar Disorder is a severe mental health disorder that affects mood swings including manic heights and depressive lows. During this production Brian Vernel who played Campbell was able to show the complexities of Bipolar disorder through his use of voice and movement. For example Brian would use very ecstatic body

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movements and have very open body language to show that Campbell is living his best life but to show the contrast of Campbell's mood swings Brian would use more closed body language to portray that he is at his lowest point and is not wanting to engage with other people. Brian has made sure to get across that his representation of Campbell is the best to his abilities as he has shown the many symptoms of Campbell's Bipolar Disorder. This production of *Takin' Over the Asylum* explores a wide range of mental health and shows people that if you are struggling there is a place you are able to go to gain help, which is an important message to send out. This further shows that mental health is widely represented within theatre and how it is something that should be shown to the world, how mental health impacts those who have it. Theatre feels more realistic than just watching something through a TV screen, as the theatre is so much more different and impactful as an audience member you're there experiencing what the actors are experiencing. This makes my argument stronger as this will engage and teach the audience how people may suffer and will encourage the audience to spread awareness.

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest - Ken Kesey written in 1962, adapted in 1963.

The character of Randle McMurphy is portrayed as a man who is struggling with mental health issues, including Bipolar Disorder and Antisocial Personality Disorder. While the play deals with serious issues such as institutionalisation and the challenges of living with a mental illness, it also uses humour to help the audience connect with the characters and to provide moments of heavy play. Mental health is often represented in theatre through the use of humour to break down the stigma surrounding mental illness and to help audiences connect with the characters on a more human level. Portraying mental health within theatre is able to get the message across more clearly rather than on a TV screen. As there is a real life audience there and they go through the journey all these characters go through too. Theatre is a far superior way to grow and relationship between the actors and audience. This further shows

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that mental health can be represented in various ways in theatre not just because it adds to the plot but it also adds meaning towards the plays and characters but it can also teach the audience a lesson about different types of mental health and how people deal with having such poor mental health. Mental health within theatre is far more beneficial as these different plays are able to explore and adapt to the characters and which will also create a bond between the audience and characters as some of them might actually be able to relate. Having a relationship between the audience and characters is very important because as an actor you need to make it feel realistic and not fake, that is why some actors who are able to tapped in to roles where their characters has poor mental health have to do so much research in order to prevent anyone from being offended and hurt, it also creates awareness for the audience to be more mindful to those who are struggling and do need help. This strengthens my argument more because it shows the positive ways the actors are able to portray mental illnesses.

Streetcar Named Desire - written by Tennessee Williams in 2014

The character of Blanche DuBois is portrayed as a woman who is struggling with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Through her character, the audience is able to gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by those with mental health issues, as well as the impact that these conditions can have on the lives of family members and loved ones. This further highlights how mental health issues also do affect those. A *Streetcar Named Desire* explores how Blanche is dealing with depression and anxiety due to past trauma. She feels alone as her little sister moved away and Blanche felt like she had to do everything by herself and everything had just gone downhill Blanche is just going down in a constant spiral as memories from the past continue to haunt her. Gillian Anderson explores and portrays Blanche fantastically during her 2014 performance at the Young Vic. "Gillian Anderson captures both Blanche's airy pretensions to grandeur and her desolate loneliness... Anderson also conveys Blanche's emotional solitude: she is especially fine in the scene with

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her nervous beau, Mitch, where you sense two helpless people desperately reaching out to each other" states the Guardian's Michael Billington¹. Magda Willis² Set design helps create this idea of Blanche's meltdown as the set is set on a revolving stage and spins whenever Blanche takes a sip of alcohol, the revolving stage is meant to represent what is truly going on inside her head and how she's slowly losing everything also during the revolving stage the music gets slowed down and everything appears to be in slow motion and the lights flash slowly creating the impression that Blanche is obviously struggling and needs help.. During the last scene the audience are shown Blanche as she has been told she's going to get help from some doctors, whilst the doctors take her away Blanche appears to be in her own world. Anderson shows that her character Blanche is always on edge as she darts about the stage. As the play goes on we can see that Blanche is really struggling as we see her begin to drink a lot more alcohol. The director Benedict Andrews would use this to his advantage as he would incorporate this towards the spinning stage. Anderson would have more of an open body language as she was drunk and she would speak in a very flirtatious tone towards the men she imagined. Through Anderson's performance it can truly be seen how much Blanche did need help and it makes the audience feel relieved as she managed to get the help she needed. This further shows that mental health is widely represented in theatre as this showed how someone was struggling so much that their own family knew that they needed help. Sometimes Mental health can't always be visible to the naked eye and it's very important to check on others even if they seem like they're coping well even though they actually might not be. Mental health within theatre is so much beneficial because of the relationship that can be created by the audience and actors and it's not the same over a TV screen where no relationship or bond can be created between the actors and audience. This further strengthens my argument of British theatre representing mental health issues by including household names which will encourage people to go and watch these productions.

¹ BILLINGTON, M., 2014.

² CLAPP, S., 2014.

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DUST - written by Milly Thomas and performed in 2017

The play follows a woman who has taken her own life and she is now watching the after effects of her death. *Dust* explores how bad Depression can really be as it can lead to suicide and how this can effect and shatter families and friends. Through showing the perspective of someone who has just taken their life, *Dust* explores the fallout when someone is no longer there and to hopefully strike a chord with those in the audience. This one woman show is all brought to life by Milly Thomas who plays Alice who took her own life but also plays the grieving mother. Although this production is very serious and trying to get a message across it also has its comedic sides. Milly Thomas states that *"I wanted Dust to be a real look at suicide and mental health. I have struggled with my own mental health for a very long time. I had the idea for the play about six years ago but I was too frightened to write it because I knew I would have to perform it."*³ The message that Thomas is trying to get across to her audience is if you are struggling with mental health there are people here who can help. This Production of *Dust* shows how the theatre industry is growing and how they are letting others tell their stories whilst at the same time providing a message that everyone is different, during this day and age theatre widely represents a wide range of people and this is only just the beginning. At the very start we are greeted with a reflection of herself and an operating table. The lighting is a very harsh white. This set and harsh light brings out the coldness of her death. The set brings out the chills on the audience as they soon come to realise that she had taken her own life. The set is very much 'cold' and empty. Having her body on an operating table with 3 mirrors plastered round her and only a single white harsh light creates an eerie atmosphere however it is all mellowed out as Milly Thomas does add a comedic side to this whilst still remaining the seriousness of mental health. This production as a one man play was also beneficial as it shows how someone who is struggling can feel so alone and struggle so much which also highlights the fact that you should always check up on loved ones. This

³ WHATSONSTAGE., 2018. Edinburgh Review.

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production also shows how mental health can take lives of the ones you love and care about, this production was all based on Milly's own struggle with mental health and this was her 'Battle cry'. This production explored other aspects of mental health and how it can actually be life threatening and affect others and could possibly create a domino effect as losing a loved one is extremely difficult. Therefore having this be portrayed in front of an audience creates more of a wider message to those in the audience as they are being able to experience this in person and not over a television screen therefore having mental health explored and put on the stage within theatre is far more impactful.

I am Tiger - Written by Oliver Emanuel and performed in 2019

This children's solo play tells the story of a young girl named Laura who is struggling with anxiety following losing her elder brother to suicide. The play had been based on the research the suicide is the biggest killer of men aged under 40. The message this play is trying to get across is to never bottle up your feelings and always be open and honest about your feelings. Having this as a children's play (aimed to those 12 and over) is very controversial as many believe little children should not be vulnerable and open to hearing things such as poor mental health and how it can lead to death or heartache. But others may disagree and argue that it is a good way to let children know from a young age that the world isn't perfect and people can experience hard times from any age. This play shows that you can have poor mental health from any age and it can start from a young age, there is no age limit whatsoever. In my opinion I truly do believe that children should be exposed to mental health from a young age because if they were to ever experience it they know they are not alone and are able to get help and gain support. Oliver states *"I want to write a one-person play for 10 years plus from the point of view of a girl – and her tiger – to explore ideas about mental health and why*

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it is so difficult to talk about. And how crazy it is to keep wild animals as pets."⁴ Emanuel also claims that he worked closely with mental health experts in order to gain better knowledge and how to portray Laura's sensitive situation. Having this solo 55 minute show in a theatre is far more impactful than having it over a television screens everyone would be living in the moment and the children that do attend these types of productions they will be able to learn about this serious through theatre which is so special, it's a different easy of learning new things. This could also encourage children and help them recognize if they are feeling any type of these emotions and going to production about mental health might encourage them to also gain help. This further proves my point that Mental health has been represented within British theatre.

Conclusion

In conclusion mental health representation within British theatre has been represented enormously. As shown through the listed productions that I have spoken about each and every single one of them has explored each character with some mental health issues. These plays use a wide range of techniques ranging from the set design, movement and voice. The actors who have portrayed these characters have clearly done their research as these topics are extremely relevant and hard to cope with. The representation of mental health within British theatre is very significant because the messages that these productions are trying to send out is that if you are struggling there is support out there for you and having poor mental health is nothing to be ashamed of. In my opinion I feel like mental health awareness should be spread around and talked about more and British theatre is the perfect place for it to start. The productions '*Dust*' and '*I Am Tiger*' are probably the most significant productions that I have researched as they both experience suicide. This highlights the fact that sometimes mental health is so severe it can end in death and death is the end of everything. Both of these

⁴ Emanuel, O., N.D.

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productions were performed solo making much more of an impact. Overall the representation of Mental Health has been portrayed perfectly through theatre and creates a lasting impression on the audience.

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