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Truth serves a purgatory better than a saint

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SummerWorks Festival

At various venues

in Toronto

There's no single style at Toronto's SummerWorks festival, but this year it seems to be a haven for documentary plays - an immediate form of theatre that is in

unfortunately short supply in Canada.

The Middle Place is an eye-opening, intelligent and funny piece of verbatim theatre that shines a light on Toronto's problems with truth in a way that other recent plays have failed to with fiction.

Andrew Kushnir created the script from two years of video interviews he conducted with 16 youths and several caseworkers living and working in a GTA shelter. Having watched all manners of fictional heart-of-gold street people and metaphysical or metaphorical tramps tread the boards over the years, it's refreshing to hear these voices of real homeless people onstage.

To Kushnir's credit, he has avoided a series of sob stories in favour of a more general portrait of the people he met. It's less about the how and why of youth homelessness, and more about the who. Along the way, though, there is plenty of insight into the issues of drugs, guns, abuse and poverty, as well as forays into art, love, education and family.

The title *The Middle Place* invites us to view this Toronto shelter as a sort of purgatory; the play gets its tension from guessing in which direction these young men and women will eventually exit it. Are they headed up, or further down and out?

Director Alan Dilworth skillfully builds the purgatorial atmosphere by corralling the youth in a bright circle in the centre of the stage; the caseworkers, meanwhile, speak to us from outside the circle. The four actors who play all the characters "buzz" in and out of the circle, as they move between the worlds.

The standouts are Akosua Amo-Adem, as a lippy and witty young woman, and Kevin Walker, as one of the 30 per cent of the shelter residents with mental-health issues, but Jessica Greenberg's soft-spoken Nevaeh will haunt you the most.

(Fourth cast member Antonio Cayonne's characters suffer from being a little too universally huggable.)

Why create a documentary through theatre rather than film? Well, for one, the method Kushnir adopted allows a greater degree of anonymity for the interview subjects. This means greater honesty and a decided lack of YouTube posturing.

Documentary theatre also has an advantage over film by avoiding voyeurism and allowing us to be in the same room with the people interviewed. The connection to the subjects is, counterintuitively, stronger due to their personalities being channelled through the blank slate of an actor. Here, it strengthens that sense of "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Lovers of language will enjoy *The Middle Place*, too. The transcribed dialogue is fresh, creative and contemporary, and makes you wish playwrights spent more time listening to the world around them.

It also makes you wish playwrights spent more time looking. If you go to see a lot of theatre, you can start to feel as if you are suffocating inside a hermetically sealed container. *The Middle Place* opens a window.

Two less successful SummerWorks shows draw on documentary techniques in other ways.

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