



DARK: Megan Furniss connects with her audience in the disturbing and sometimes bizarre *Drive with Me*.

SYMBOLIC JOURNEYS

Daring theatrical experience

DRIVE WITH ME. Directed by Liz Mills, with Megan Furniss. Sound art James Webb. Visuals Sanjin Muftic. At the Alexander Upstairs Theatre, on select nights until July 12 at 7pm. **STEYN DU TOIT** reviews.

THE play starts abruptly. The theatre's bright house lights are all left on. You mistake the bewildered-looking woman stomping on to stage for a latecomer who took a wrong turn in finding her seat. She begins speaking.

Her physicality and mannerisms make you laugh. You do not notice her hand around your throat until it is too late.

Written by Megan Furniss, *Drive With Me* is a dark and daring theatrical experience. Winner of an Ovation Award at last year's National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the script draws on a myriad of literary, film and pop culture references.

Presented in the form of an academic lecture being given as part of the festival's annual *Think!Fest* programme, the production also utilises storytelling's popular road trip trope to take its viewer on an extraordinary mental journey.

Titled *The Road Trip*, Marion Taylor's (Furniss) lecture starts out

by focusing on journeys and their symbols in fiction. Making use of a projector, she shows us stills relating to her notes.

Homer's *The Odyssey*, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Jack Nicholson's *About Schmidt* and even Dr Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* – these are just a few of the works featured.

Directed by Liz Mills, pretty soon the lecture starts taking self-referential turns as well, with Taylor's recounting of how she physically drove from Cape Town to Grahamstown making up major chunks of her speech.

Apart from physically chronicling her journey – ticking off landmarks such as Somerset West, Rivieronsderend and Klein Brak in the process – the recognition of various seemingly random visual cues along the way also triggers certain

memories from Taylor's life.

No stranger to local thespians thanks to her popular blog (www.meganshead.co.za) and regular appearances as part of the *Theatre-sports* cast, seeing Furniss in her element on stage is always an enjoyable encounter.

With the well-written *Drive With Me* she once again shows a remarkable ability to connect with, and build a relationship, with each member of her audience.

So unswerving (pun intended) is her acting, and so emotionally involved do we become with her character's journey over the course of the show, that we often feel as if we are sitting right beside her in the car.

We can see the empty chips packet she spots blowing against a fence in our mind's eye. We can't wait to stop for a wee and coffee break when she refills her car at the Riversdale petrol station. And the

same shiver is sent down our spines when, while passing a taxi believed to be transporting a corpse in its trailer, she notices that all its passengers are wearing creepy animal masks.

With each passing kilometre, Marion's sightings and experiences become darker, weirder and more unsettling. While she continues to knit well-known references into her narrative – by now Stephen King, Bjork and the characters from *The Wizard of Oz* have all made an appearance – the plot increasingly appears to be unravelling at an even faster pace. Beware, as viewer you'll soon also be caught up in this existential, gothic and ballsy tale of memory and mortality.

But while there is more than a fair share of unnerving and WTF? material – notice how the lights are dimmed over the course of the show, for instance, or how Sanjin Muftic's visuals play with your mind when you least expect it – *Drive With Me* also contains some candid observations.

Marion recognising one of the beggars from *Waiting for Godot* in a flag-waver at roadworks, or hearing the name of a boy she never dated at university which pops up in a Neil Young song, make for unexpected moments of sincere revelation.

Does Marion live in some kind of netherworld, similar to our own yet tinged with oddities?

Is her bizarre tale perhaps a metaphor depicting one woman's descent into madness? Or did she maybe die in a car accident on the way to Grahamstown one year, with her ghost – unaware that she is dead – finding herself caught in some kind of limbo loop?

All of these are possibilities for what's really going on, but ultimately it is up to each viewer to find their own answer within the millions of other hypothetical scenarios. That's because, as with any great road trip narrative, the script isn't so much concerned with answers as it is with its protagonist's journey of getting to the truth. Seeing the play on the eve of my own departure to this year's festival, I often found the script's grip around my throat tighten as the parallels between my own upcoming journey and that of Marion's became more and more visible.

Disturbing, detailed, creative, bizarre and very, very meta – hitching a ride with *Drive With Me* is a rewarding trip for those willing to see where the road leads them.

● Tickets are R80 to R90. To book, call 021 300 1652, or see www.alexanderbar.co.za

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