



Event

The fading of the light

Sometimes it's the very shape of an auditorium that can add an extra dimension to a performance, drawing the audience even more deeply into an unfolding piece of drama. The anatomy lecture theatre at the Summerhall arts venue in Edinburgh, UK, is a perfect example. Summerhall once was home to The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies at the University of Edinburgh and the semi-circle of wooden, tiered seating has been preserved in its Edwardian lecture theatre. Watching drama in the round adds to the audience's voyeuristic nature, especially with raised seats looking down on the stage. That intimacy was used to maximum effect in *All The Lights Are On*, a one-act play staged as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts festival.

The play, a debut penned by Finnish writer Kaisa Lundan and staged by Helsinki-based performing arts agency ACE-Production, follows the story of Emmy, a 30-year-old woman diagnosed with brain cancer, and how husband Petri, mother Terhl, and godfather Jani cope with her illness. Actress Ashley Smith, who plays Emmy, wrings the most out of the space by making eye contact with members of the audience as she delivers many of her soliloquies, giving voice to the thoughts and feelings raging through her mind as she embarks on chemotherapy. Ali Watt, who portrays Petri, also directly addresses the audience during the play, yet Smith's use of eye contact and the way in which she circles round the front row adds an extra dimension to the performance.

That intimacy between actress and audience has echoes of *HeLa*, another piece of drama about cancer—staged at the Summerhall venue as part of the 2013 Edinburgh International Science Festival—by writer and actress Adura Onashile. Her one-woman play was based on the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a piece of narrative non-fiction by science writer Rebecca Skloot, which was published in 2010. *HeLa* was staged in the Demonstration Room, another one of the former teaching areas at the old Dick Vet school which provided a similarly atmospheric performance space, drawing in members of audience in a voyeuristic fashion.

The staging also capitalises on the shape of the auditorium, with a circular kitchen table sitting at the centre of the semi-circle of seats, with a bed behind. The set doubles up as both Emmy and Petri's home and also as the hospice where she spends her final days. One of the most effective scenes comes as Meatloaf's *Paradise By The Dashboard Light* plays in the background—the music initially accompanies Emmy and Petri as they clear up after Tehrl's birthday party, which leads to them kissing on the kitchen table; Emmy then begins convulsing and Petri must help her find the

right medication from among the myriad bottles she's been given, before laying her down on the bed. The music goes from being energetic as it accompanies their love-making to frantic as it emphasises the stressful nature of caring for a loved-one at home. "Imagine, you're having sex with your wife, you're halfway to orgasm and you have to stop because she's having an epileptic fit," Petri tells the audience afterward. "To think you could actually kill someone with sex. Well, I suppose if you're going to go then there's no better way."

Such raw dialogue comes thick and fast in the play, with no holds barred. Euthanasia, fear, and guilt are all explored. The piece is emotionally charged, examining the breakdown in Emmy and Petri's relationship as he struggles to cope with her illness, ultimately leaving as she enters the hospice. It also explores her family's differing attitudes to her cancer: Tehrl believes that hope and positive thinking can help to alter the chemistry and structure of her brain and improve her chances of recovery, while Petri tells the audience that he's seen Emmy praying and speaks about how as atheists she and he used to ridicule people who did the same. The only flaw in the translation from Finnish was a couple of cultural references: the name of Tehrl's home town stood out and could have been switched simply to somewhere local to the current production, while the idea of Tehrl not receiving white weiss on mother's day—presumably a traditional gift in Finland—was lost, and could perhaps have been swapped for something regionally relevant, such as daffodils.

As Emmy's cancer develops, her memories begin to disintegrate; she doesn't know from one moment to the next why she's in the hospice or thinks she's at earlier stages in her life, including before she and Petri were married. The breakdown of her mind leads to an incredibly effective moment in the closing stages of the play, where the lights dim and Smith removes the scarf she's worn tied round her head, revealing her hair for the first time since the start of the play; this ghost-like version of the old Emmy addresses first Tehrl and then Petri, giving them words of comfort and encouragement. In the final scene of the play, as Emmy lies dying in her hospice bed, Petri returns to her side and lies next to her as the stage lights get brighter and brighter, before snapping off into blackness when Emmy dies. Despite both the energy and the tenderness Smith brings to the performance, ultimately this isn't a play about Emmy. It's a play about Petri, it's a play about Tehrl, it's a play about Jani; it's a play about the people who are left behind when someone they love dies from brain cancer.

Peter Ranscombe



Published Online
September 4, 2018
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(18\)30332-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(18)30332-6)

All The Lights Are On
Anatomy Lecture Theatre,
Summerhall
Edinburgh Festival Fringe
Edinburgh, UK
Aug 1–26, 2018
<http://starttofinnish.fi/>

For more on **Summerhall** see
<https://www.summerhall.co.uk/>

For more on the **Edinburgh Festival Fringe** see <https://www.edfringe.com/>

For a **review of HeLa** see
Lancet Oncol 2013; published
online May 1, 2018.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045\(13\)70200-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045(13)70200-6)