

Play fails to rise from the ashes

LAST GASP: THE ASHTRAY PROJECT
Upstairs at the Gatehouse

★★★★☆

ON PAPER, this collaborative show inspired by the smoking ban interested me – a collection of stories examining smoking in our society, written from an ashtray's perspective. And with Cancer Research UK involved, this seemed like a project worthy of attention. The play begins with six 'ashtrays' thrown into a cupboard. Over the course of the evening, they recount episodes from their lives before the smoking ban. There are 18 stories in all, the six actors each

playing multiple parts.

Some of the stories were well-written and quite funny but overall these episodes left me cold. Jayne Dickinson's direction was subtle and well-considered and there were some excellent performances, particularly from Amy Tweed and Michael Lindall. But again and again, I found myself wondering why we were hearing from ashtrays at all.

When dealing with human issues, the show is very convincing. But these episodes are dismayingly few and far between. The estranged father and daughter for example, who meet in a pub after many years apart, but cannot resolve

their troubles. Or the emotional parting of a lesbian couple at an airport, observed by a well-meaning solo traveller. It is unfortunate that the only stories in a show about ashtrays that catch the attention and register emotionally are the ones that have nothing to do with smoking.

This is the fatal flaw of The Ashtray Project – ashtrays are just not very interesting and no amount of clever staging will change this fact. Raising money for charity is very admirable of course, but next time, a premise with some dramatic potential wouldn't go amiss.

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HAM & HIGH

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