

There are some performances which should be available on the National Health, and Pain, presented by NVA and performed by Graham Cunnington, is one of them. Only this prescription should be compulsory for those who work in the 'health' industry.

Pain, at the Arches, is Cunnington's autobiography, a poetic and visually stunning portrayal of his family, work and life as a sufferer and survivor of chronic rheumatoid arthritis.

Director Angus Farquhar, in an inspired collaboration with Dr Graham Tydeman (set design), Lorne Christie of Edit 1-2-3 (digital animator) and Alistair Bell of Locofoco (graphics/slide designer), has produced something greater than the sum of its parts, an empathetic experience which entertains, informs and enlightens.

Cunnington's life story would, in other hands, make grim telling, with an epileptic mother, bullying at school and, for the most part, insensitive treatment at the hands of the medical profession. Yet he expresses himself throughout with a wry and loving spirit, by means of his text of prose poetry and generous physicality.

Occasionally a scene outstays its welcome, with a tendency to dwell on areas of painful reminiscence, but moments of unconscious indulgence are outweighed by scenes of sharp and joyful ingenuity.

The description of pain itself is awesome, made visible by projected pathways littered with shards of glass. Cunnington reinvents his participation with film clips, a huge sheet of metal, an iron bar and an original soundtrack.

Finally, having rejected conventional medical treatment, he shares with us his huge commitment to life and love. A beautiful performance, theatrical and artistic, it is flawed - like the rest of humanity - and all the more wonderful for that.

Floyd Kennedy