

## Reviews of A Beginner's Guide to Populism

### BUXTON FRINGE REVIEW

We have, at the beginning, an ambitious but plainly out of her depth MP, who is prepared to completely reverse her previous stance out of expediency; a scheming, unprincipled figure pulling her strings in the background; if I add the fact that one of the other politicians appears to have a rubber duck as a toy, does that ring any disturbing bells?

It will therefore come to no surprise to you that this is a play about populism and what happens when it goes unchecked, in the words of the programme notes. It was a thoroughly entertaining play, brilliantly executed and cleverly written.

The scene opens with the hollow, vacuously vain and slightly dim politician on the rise Antonia Morgan, played in uncomfortable looking shoes by Isabel Palmstierna. The residents of Little Middleton are up in arms about proposals that will spell the end of their village. Following the announcement of plans to create Middleton Garden City, they have launched the Save Little Middleton campaign, and hope that it will preserve their historic community and keep it out of the hands of property developers and speculators. But she was one of the people in favour of the proposals. As she fusses and clucks around her daily business she is held in check by the suave urbane spin-doctor Jeremy Taylor, played all too convincingly by Will Underwood. There then enters the more nuanced character of the rough and ready Brian, played by Chris Townsend, accompanied by Colleen (Beag Horn). But are things really as they seem?

Before long, although not before Antonia has performed a complete ideological volte-face, the tables are turned in another way. It is the coarse-tongued but astute Brian who has the upper hand, apparently, and the slitheringly slimy Jeremy is quick to side with him. Everything is turned on its head and the following events and outcome are not what you might expect.

All of the actors are excellent in this smartly-paced show. It is expertly conceived, written and executed by a team who plainly have an eye for the socio-political zeitgeist, such as it is. Echoes of the present resonate throughout – references to sex pests, contempt for experts, the invitation to build a wall, no U-turns... This is all delivered with wry humour and witty lines, with the odd cringeworthy pun about views and being committed. In the end everything descends into chaos in the manner of a Tom Sharpe farce, although the brutal nature of the ending may surprise you. Furthermore, Brian's graphic turns of phrase may surprise your children at times.

NoLogoproductions are based in Scotland and will take their show to the Edinburgh Fringe in August. They are here at the Arts Centre on the 11th, 18th and 20th at 9 pm and I highly recommend them to you – my theatre-going companion said it was the best show he has seen at the Fringe so far.

Ian Hamilton <https://buxtonfringe.org.uk/reviews2018the.html#2284>

### EDFRINGE REVIEW.COM

Walking into the studio space of the SpaceTriplex felt almost like walking into a classroom. This was certainly fitting for the informative, yet entertaining story that takes a look at the effects of modern populism.

'A Beginner's Guide to Populism' follows candidate Antonia Morgan, desperate to win a seat at any cost. Her slimy agent Jeremy Taylor, equally ambitious and unscrupulous, convinces her that the only way to win is to go with the will of the people. In this case the will is to keep the village of Little Middleton separate from the planned new city Middleton Garden City.

They explore the effects of simple language on crowds, the use of personal attack and divisive campaigning. One particularly funny, but also poignant, moment was the debate between the well-meaning village councillor Coleen, and Antonia. The councillor, infinitely more qualified and dedicated to the cause, falls flat in debate when faced with baseless accusations of elitism and corruption. Sound familiar?

With Trumpisms and Brexit rhetoric as their fuel the citizens of Little Middleton take to the streets, demanding a moat is built to keep out 'the others' (who these others are is never properly specified). They get progressively more extreme as the message becomes increasingly fiery. The mob, led by concerned life-long Little Middletonian Brian Barber, eventually stop all foreign trade, leading to food, power and fuel shortages, leaving the ragged leaders to attempt to remain in control.

'A Beginner's Guide to Populism' becomes increasingly frantic, and the message escalates to an unrecognisable fever pitch – the tongue in cheek laughs come fewer and further between. What began as a funny, almost silly show, becomes a full blow dystopian nightmare. The climax of the show sees the would-be leader attempt to retract her words after finally realising the effect they'd had. Sadly, it was too late, and Brian, egged on by the angry mob, kills her.

It is a pretty bleak outcome considering the current political climate, and no solution is offered, the play just ends. Though the language used at first felt like a joke, it came abundantly clear that it was deadly serious. Part of the cleverness of this play was echoing the current political situation, but not copying it. In this way they are able to demonstrate the dangers without being clichéd.

There is a plethora of political satire and critique being produced at the moment, and so finding a unique take on it is hard. 'A Beginner's Guide of Populism' is able to take a fairly worn out topic and give it a fresh face, it's incredibly refreshing and thought provoking, and somehow manages to be funny too! A wonderfully thought-out production.

Eleanor Gunn – EdFringeReview.com <http://edfringereview.com/r/W2qet76sTBKWdEQPXdx6yg>

## FRINGE GURU

In these days of increased nationalism and demagoguery – think of your nearest blonde-bouffanted egotistical politician – *A Beginner's Guide to Populism* tells us how we got here, and the dangers of letting it run unchecked. The play is broadly satirical with elements of farce, and raises plenty of laughs with its all-too-recognisable shenanigans, though not without darker notes to sound a warning.

In the constituency office of Little Middleton, we met the new prospective parliamentary candidate for the opposition – Antonia Morgan. She's joined by the suave Jeremy Taylor, sent from party HQ to establish "Project Connect", with the aim of reconnecting with the grassroots and winning the seat (which is "so far down the target list Jeremy Vine walks offscreen before he gets to it"). They meet with Parish Council leader, Colleen Cousins, who is less than impressed with Antonia's newfound conversion to their cause; and with Brian Barber, who claims no interest in politics but is angry and very well-informed on local issues.

The Mandelsonian Jeremy, played with oily relish by Will Underwood, persuades Antonia to ditch her principles in favour of expediency. Their tactic works, but soon power goes to the head of firebrand Brian, and events run out of control with both hilarious and horrifying results. The cast capture the essence of their characters well; Isabel Palmstierna is an earnest but malleable Antonia, Beag Horn is complacent and self-righteous as Colleen, whereas Chris Townsend's transformation from cynic to zealot drives the play.

The writing by Andy Moseley is pointed and telling, and manages to note many of the strategies feeding the rise of populism without feeling didactic. When Antonia worries her speech was over-the-top, she's told no-one will listen to the whole speech anyway, so it's about appealing to emotions rather than using facts. The us-and-them divisions are nicely drawn, as what makes an outsider so becomes ever more ludicrously defined, and there are references to fake news and censorship.

The pace does become a little frenetic towards the end, and the Svengali figure of Jeremy drifts from prominence; it seems surprising that such a character would allow himself to fall from power. Also, there are topics left unaddressed; as I write this, the people next to me in the cafe (OK, wine bar, but I'm trying not to appear an out-of-touch elitist) are describing how they met educated middle-class Americans who were proud to have voted Trump, but this production doesn't address this aspect of populism's appeal.

*A Beginner's Guide to Populism* is a timely production. It lampoons populism and its insular message with great verve, but without offering simple solutions. It makes no attempt to persuade us that everything will be all right – and there is darkness behind the buffoonery.

Stephen Walker – Fringe Guru <http://buxton.fringeguru.com/reviews/buxton-2018/a-beginners-guide-to-populism>

## EDFRINGEREVIEW.COM

Antonia Morgan (Isabel Palmstierna) is an ambitious young politician who whips up fear and panic in a bid to advance her political career, and in the process, unleashes a tide of unstoppable populist forces. 'A Beginner's Guide to Populism' is an incredibly pertinent piece of political satire, exploring the devastating effects of populism remaining unchecked.

Aided by the Malcom Tucker-esque Jeremy Taylor (Will Underwood), Morgan climbs the ranks of political power, adopting a rhetoric imbued with xenophobia and racism. Faced with the possibility of Little Middleton being redeveloped as part of the 'Green-City' project, Morgan and Taylor set into motion a series of political machinations in order to secure power over the village.

Underwood and Palmstierna's acting in their respective roles, was excellent. Both were able to capture the soundbite-worthy tone of voice, in their discussions concerning the future of Little Middleton. "We've got to make this country great again", Taylor bellows at a sheepish Morgan in one of many lines which could have appeared in recent news.

Chris Townsend's portrayal of Brian Barber (the village's self-imposed "leader") was a terrifically scary performance. As the production progressed, Barber became both a foot-soldier and a commanding officer in establishing Little Middleton's independence movement. At times, Townsend's depiction of Barber was like that (both in voice and mannerisms), of Enoch Powell. Barber's monologue about "building a wall" around Little Middleton, eerily reminded me of Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

Despite its riveting acting, which at times reminded me of watching an episode of 'The Thick of It', I personally felt that the performance's sudden ending felt anti-climactic. Morgan, horrified by the consequences of her populist policies, is apparently thrown into an angry mob at the hands of Barber. This melodramatic ending undermined the important pieces of political satire made throughout the performance, and left me feeling slightly disappointed.

However, 'A Beginner's Guide to Populism' is very much a relevant and effective piece of political critique. The acting of its cast and its script are both comic and biting. A worthwhile show to watch in our particular political climate.

Olivia Cooke – EdFringeReview.com <http://edfringereview.com/r/W2qet76sTBKWdEQPXDx6yg>

## LONDON THEATRE1.COM

With *A Beginner's Guide to Populism*, Andy Moseley skewers everything that is troubling about politics today in an hour-long show as fresh as the day's news and in which, refreshingly, the B-word isn't even mentioned.

As Antonia Morgan, a gauche local authority councillor with much greater political ambitions, Isabel Palmstierna is consistently hilarious as she learns, obeys and breaks the new rules of power, as set out by a shadowy party apparatchik, an exceedingly slippery Jeremy Taylor played by Will Underwood. But in trying to win over the voters of Little Middleton, an "unwinnable" seat, Morgan has first to reconcile her new more "flexible" outlook with the principled views she expressed on certain local issues in the past, views that a local man, played boorishly by Jordan Edgington, is determined to exploit to the full.

Moseley emphasises that his target is politics not any specific political party yet it is hard not to see *A Beginner's Guide to Populism* as a sharply focused look at the commit-to-nothing-in-order-to-please-everyone tactics of a certain current leader as well as the wider risks of populism in Europe as well as on both sides of the Atlantic. And the play's conclusion underlines sharply that what starts as a vocal minority is likely to end as a feral mob.

*A Beginner's Guide to Populism*, directed with pace and humour by David Wood, has had a short run at the Cockpit before moving outside London. Catch it if you can.

Louis Mazzini – LondonTheatre1.com <https://www.londontheatre1.com/reviews/a-beginners-guide-to-populism-review-voila-europe-festival/>

## DAILY BUSINESS

Think Trump. Think walls. That should provide an essential understanding of how this 50-minute production seeks to explore the nastier aspects of trying to ride on a popular ticket when it all goes unchecked.

The fear of being invaded, whether violent, political or economic has a long history, harking back to the castles and city walls of ancient times, right through to Berlin and Belfast. They're designed, of course, to keep people out. Or do they keep them in? Whatever their motive they are created by those who detect danger and seek self-preservation.

Writer Andy Moseley's play relocates this fear and alarm to an absurd level, focusing on the inhabitants of a British (middle England?) village, Little Middleton, where tensions are mounting over a plan to turn the parish into a giant new garden city.

To save Little Middleton being over-run by an invasion of unsympathetic townies a new political movement is formed around the gullible new parliamentary candidate Antonia Morgan (Isabel Palmstierna) who is manipulated by the scheming activist Jeremy Taylor (Will Underwood). As minor concerns turn into widespread civil chaos, they face the growing and menacing challenge of a new and more commanding leader, Brian Barber (Chris Townsend).

With its talk of walls and moats, and cynical views of news reports there are clear references to Trump, fake news and the Brexit campaign. While the plot is clearly a dark and exaggerated comedy, it does point to how susceptible the public can be to those who first use their charm to secure power and then turn to more sinister means to impose and maintain it.

The performance is suitably manic, if at times a little too shouty and chaotic, but it thrives on a sense of panic assisted by subtle sound effects. The plot will certainly give audiences something to think about.

Terry Murden – Daily Business <http://magazine.dailybusinessgroup.co.uk/2018/08/21/fear-and-loathing-portrays-the-politics-of-today/>

## PLAYS TO SEE

A Beginner's Guide to Populism is a light-hearted comedy about power that becomes darker and darker as the performance goes on, leaving the audience with a feeling of intense unease about the state of the world.

Antonia Morgan is a career politician desperate to get into power even if it means compromising her intellectual integrity. Wishing to gain a seat, she employs populist rhetoric to win over the villagers of Little Middleton. The biggest issue facing the village is the prospect of becoming part of a larger garden city and losing its rural charm. Colleen Cousins has been active in setting up a committee to combat the looming changes but her policies have not been radical enough. Enter Morgan who, on the advice of her aide Jeremy Taylor and goaded by villager Brian, commits to preventing Little Middleton's loss of its independent identity against her better judgement.

The play is an excellent, if rather generalised, reflection of the burgeoning rule of a tyrannical majority. It begins satirically with Brian declaring independence for Little Middleton, before moving towards a dark ending as the mob takes over.

A Beginner's Guide to Populism is a little slow to begin with but develops into a wonderfully acted piece that uses humour effectively to emphasise its dark message. A funny and occasionally deeply concerning hour which will leave you convinced that we need better politicians.

Agnes Carrington-Windo Plays to See <https://playstosee.com/a-beginners-guide-to-populism/>