



A String Section ★★★★★

by Tom Moyser on 25th August 2015

Here is what happens in A String Section: five women cut the legs off the chairs on which they are sitting. In most fundamental ways, it does not do anything more or less than this premise.

The five chairs are broadly similar in size but different in design. Some look old, some new. Four have cushions built into the seat. They are, I suppose, dining chairs since none of them have arms, although some would not look out of place in a living room, in amongst more comfy options. There is nothing about them that warrants or invites destruction.

And then, sometimes as a soloist, sometimes a duo, sometimes in threes, fours or all at once, the five performers destroy the chairs, purposefully, slowly, incrementally, completely. How exactly this is done, and in what manner, varies throughout the show and between performer. Sometimes, she will lie flat, face down, craning towards the exact angle needed for impact. Sometimes her legs are open, saw between them. Often, she will look placid, even bored, like she is doing no more than scratching an itch.

In that gradual, piece-at-a-time pace of the sawing, the slow, downward movement gives A String Section structure, progression and direction. It creates expectations, promises outcomes, and then presents an inefficient – but never directionless – route by which they are achieved. Essentially, it extracts and concentrates the essence of most drama, comedy and music – tension and release – but delays the pay-off, revelling instead in the anticipation.

This description, however, risks making A String Section sound merely like an artistic statement that will not be apt for real audiences. It is good this exists, you might think, but will I get anything from actually seeing it – indeed, out of paying actual money to see it – that I cannot get from just hearing about it? In fact, for the first ten minutes, I did wonder whether it was all too ridiculous; whether it was aimed too much at critics, not paying punters; whether anyone there that day would just walk out.

After thirty minutes, walk-outs are unimaginable. As, for that matter, is turning away your head, even for a second. I want, I think, to see how this turns out. My emotional suspense is bound inexorably with the literal, physical suspense of the women's bodies. I cannot turn away until we – the five performers, the audience, the technician, everyone in the theatre – have finished; until the chairs are, what? Destroyed? Will that be enough? Until the underside of each seat is flat on the stage floor? What the promised resolution will actually look like becomes hazier as the stage gets messier and the chairs sink unevenly, quicksand-like, into it.

I still have reservations about the ethics of destroying five objects that are the product of craftsmanship and energy, especially furniture at a time when basic living costs are stretched. It is not as if we can afford to waste wood either. Questions, I expect, will be asked as the show's prominence grows. Whether or not it is ultimately defensible, I am not sure.

What I can say, however, is that I have never been to a performance – of anything – where the need for resolution, for completion, has felt so compelling, has been so actively craved. I would happily have sat there for twice A String Section's forty-five minute running time, caught up in that feeling of things about to fall.