I saw a production of ‘John’ on 18th November 2014 at the National Theatre, London by DV8 Physical Theatre. The play is a Docudrama, using verbatim text of interviews with men in a gay sauna, particularly focusing on the story of the titular character John. The style of acting used is physical theatre and a lot of actions used by the actors are improvised choreography which is able to portray the emotions behind the monologues and dialogues in which they are performing. Using this method, the actors were able to portray various different aspects of their characters.

One performance that I particularly enjoyed was that of Hannes Langolf. The actor successfully showed different sides to John, and I was very impressed by his performance, in particular, as I found it highly effective. Through his vocal, physical and facial expression, he was able to convey John’s initial struggle with his family and his abusive childhood; his drug and alcohol abuse; his imprisonment and redemption and finally the realisation of his sexuality.

One moment where John appeared very accepting of his life was at the beginning of the play, when we were given an overview of his childhood. The staging rotated, and as it went round the audience was presented with freeze frames that would present an aspect from his childhood, presenting serious themes such as violence, rape, theft and alcohol abuse. As John walked through these various images of his past, Langolf presented him with his voice quite low, and every so often he would do a small movement like pointing at what was occurring or shrugging his shoulders, showing that the events, which were evidently shocking to the audience, didn’t affect him. Hannes Langolf clearly understood the effect of the words of the verbatim text; especially on the line ‘At 10, I went into care. I was quite pleased to be honest’. Here Langolf directing addressed the audience, and let out a sigh midway through the line, his voice was quite high pitched but he spoke at a low volume, to show he was quite light-hearted about the situation. He had his arms elongated to the side of him, and shrugged his shoulders at the end of the line. This made the audience sympathise with his character right from the beginning of the play. Langolf’s understanding of the verbatim text and the way he portrayed it through his vocal skills allowed us to see an empathetic side to his character.

Another aspect of John’s character is portrayed in the scene where he tells us about his old girlfriends –which allow us to see a caring, yet flirty, side to John, shown by Langolf early on in the production. Here Langolf used his physical skills and his facial expressions in order to portray these aspects of his character. As John starts to tell the audience about his time before he knew about his sexuality, coat hangers would descend from the ceiling, and John would hang a dress from a washing basket to represent the woman he was speaking about. Langolf portrayed John as quite embarrassed about all of his previous flings, his eye focus was quite shifty as he spoke about most of the woman, and he looked quite flustered as he spoke about his relationships with them, speaking quite fast and his cheeks went red, and he raised his eyebrows to show a lack of regret. His body gestures were quite fidgety as he squirmed to explain the stories. He opened his mouth quite wide whilst speaking about them, and would often grit his teeth. However, when he would make witty comments, such as when he said how all their names ended with ‘ee’, he raised his eyebrows to the audience, showing a joking aspect of his character. However when speaking about one the women, Langolf pulled the dress towards him gently by its waist, and as he spoke of the woman he slowly slipped his hand down the front of the dress as if to grope her, and cheekily smiled as he did this. This showed us a different side to John’s character as it was quite flirty and displayed his previous affections towards women. Also in this scene a baby grow descended from the ceiling, and even though he admitted it wasn’t his child, Langolf stared at the baby grow adoringly with big, bright and loving eyes, which showed a caring side to the character, as even though the baby wasn’t his own, he loved it as if it was.

A moment where we saw a polar opposite side to John, was that in the heroin addiction scene, where we saw a very negative and vulnerable side to John. Here Langolf’s body sloped and his legs looked rubber-like and boneless, almost falling even as he stood, it was as if his feet were rooted to the floor by magnets yet the rest of his body wafted freely. It gave a very dazing effect, and visually showed the effect the drugs took on John’s body. As John describes the catastrophic death of one of his friends due to overdose, he seamlessly folded and unfolded his body in paroxsyms of pain. The use of Langolf physicality really helped portray the effect of the drugs on his body and presented a very low point in his life.

A much more positive scene to follow up from the drug abuse scene, is one where John is finally getting his life back together and redeeming himself. Langolf is simply sat in a chair in centre stage with a single spotlight lighting him, as he takes a test there is ticking sound in the background. Langolf moved his body in time to the ticking noise using very sharp and quick movements, with very intent focus on what he was doing. He held a pencil in his hand, with quite a limp wrist, with his eye focus constantly on the pencil throughout the scene, however the rest of his body was very rigid. The movement of Langolf’s body in time to the ticking as well as his focus, symbolised John finally getting his life in order, and his direct movements showed he finally had a purpose in life.

Overall in the key moments that I have described, I learnt several different aspects of John’s character through Hannes Langolf’s very sensitive portrayal of the role.

Ao2- 12/17 Ao4- 20/33 32/50 grade- A (low grade A- you can still improve)

 Excellent first essay. A solid understanding of the intentions of the production team and the demands of the question (aspects of the character)

You cover lots of little moments in each scene, which allows you to explore many different sides of the character. It is perhaps worth describing less moments in more detail so that you can have a “There is sound critical appreciation of performance skills”

Task-take one of the moments I have highlighted where you could add more detail about the acting and on another piece of paper, add more detail about the acting (take a bit of artistic license if you want, its fine to stretch the truth a little if it makes your description more detailed.)