

Theatre

24:7 festival New Century House, Manchester

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The 24:7 festival, now in its seventh year, is a week-long showcase of new one-act plays presented at the headquarters of the Co-operative Society, which might be said to have laid the foundations of the profit-sharing principle on which fringe theatre has operated ever since.

Sheepish is a charming piece of pastoral absurdism by Joyce Branagh, in which two rams stand in a field munching grass, jumping over benches and discussing the poetry of WH Davies. Branagh's fable may carry a moral about refusing to follow the flock, though it does seem a statement of the bleating obvious.

Pawn is a caper-comedy about a bungled robbery in Cash Converters by Brian Marchbank, a police officer with real-life experience of defusing hostage situations. Policemen are not generally noted for their great sense of humour - but Marchbank proves to be a fine exception.

In Paul Osborne's *The Bluest Blue*, a bookish young art student sitting outside York Minster is rudely interrupted by a fairy traffic warden who wants assistance with her wings. It's a sweetly fatalistic odd-couple comedy that shows a great ear for dialogue. When Felix explains that he is studying the Italian Renaissance, Raquel replies: "Oh yeah, we had one of them in Barnsley. Some posh architect wanted to turn it into a Tuscan hill town."

The *Inconsistent Whisper of Insanity*, by Ian Moore, is the story of a woman caught in the crossfire of the Kronstadt rebellion, the unsuccessful uprising against the Bolshevik government in 1921. Lenin stated that the uprising "lit up reality like a lightning flash"; which is much how Moore chooses to present it, with a fragmented narrative featuring much repetition, some striking social realist tableau and conspiratorial murmuring from a large chorus.

Alfred Hickling

The festival continues until 1 August.

Details: 247theatrefestival.co.uk