

## REVIEWS & ARTICLE



REVIEW “Vodka Talks” by The Copenhagen Post.  
5 out of 6 Stars

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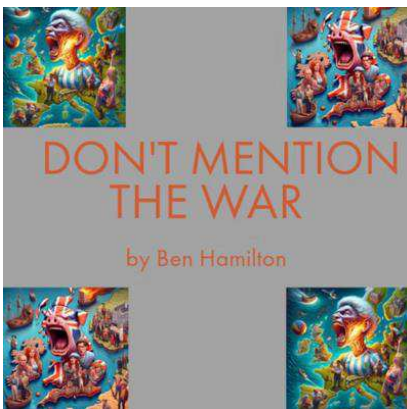


REVIEW “HAP” by Kunst Kapel.  
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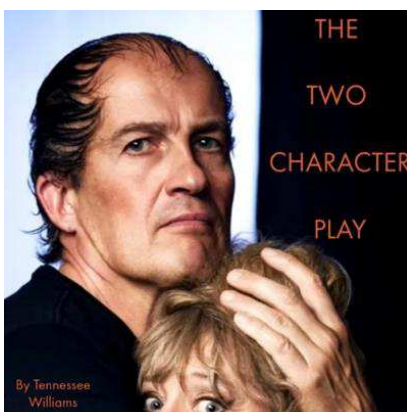


ARTICLE “How to make it as an English-language theatre creative in Copenhagen” by The Copenhagen Post.

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4 out of 5 Stars

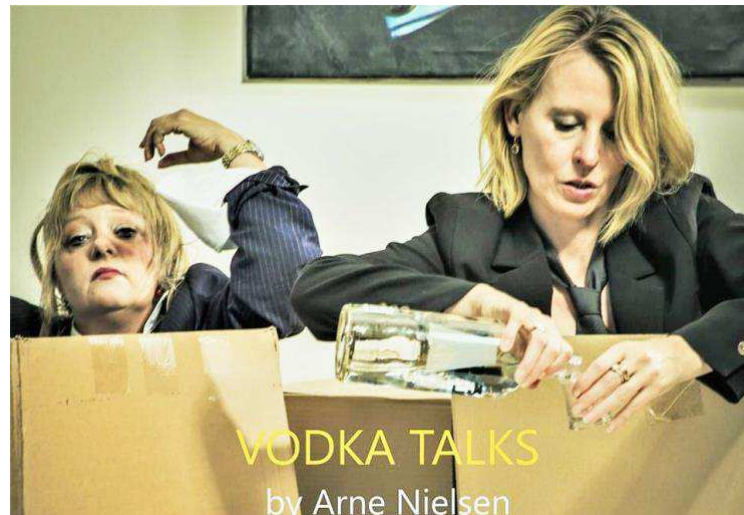
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# Performance Review: When vodka talks, anything can happen

★★★★★



Following their success in 'The Clean Room' and 'Hap', it was only a matter of time before Jana Pulkrabek and Vanessa Poole reunited on stage once again – this time for a production of the play 'Vodka Talks' by HIT International Theatre Arts, the company they together run.

So not only did they star in 'Vodka Talks', but they also produced it and played a major role in translating it. The original German work required a lot of work and, together with its Danish author Arne Nielsen and director Lars Junggreen, the pair worked hard to bring it to the stage.

The results were first enjoyed by audiences at Bastionen Theatre in Malmö, British-born Poole's hometown and, judging by their reaction, Copenhageners are in for a treat when they perform it at Teatret ved Sorte Hest in late April.

## **Emotional rollercoaster**

While the German version is quite a bit longer, the English adaptation comes in at about an hour and a half with no intermission.

And right from the start, it's an emotional rollercoaster, as the two sisters take us through a wide range of emotions from anger to sadness and lots of laughter along the way – lubricated with generous lashings of vodka.

## **Perfect foils**

Pulkrabek is touching and sincere as the calmer sister. A large part of her performance is the way she reacts to Poole's more boisterous shenanigans.

Poole, meanwhile, relishes the chance to snap, crackle and pop in a role that could have been custom-made for the actress.

Together, they perfectly present the kind of sibling love/hate relationship we find at the cornerstone of so much of our compelling drama over the ages: from 'King Lear' to 'Succession'!

### Highly original staging

This play is both extremely funny and poignant. It raises many interesting questions about modern day society and the way humankind is trying to, but failing to control its future. There is so much to identify with here: everyone will recognise traits true to their own families. And a big commendation must be given to the original staging. At the beginning of the play, the actresses share the stage with 50 cardboard boxes, which they do their best to dispose of over the course of the play. Together with some brilliant sound effects, the audience is fully immersed throughout.

### Vodka Talks

April 2023; Teatret ved Sorte Hest, Vesterbrogade 150, Frederiksberg; tickets details TBC

# WHEN HAPPINESS BECOMES A HAPPENING

☆☆☆☆ · 4 out of 5

Written by Martha Elias. Seen on April 11, 2024, at 20:00. TEATRET VED SORTE HEST

**HAP is a heartwarming journey through joy and despair that reveals stressing factors of human relations, dystopian, post-pandemic urban life, and most importantly, the conditions governing human existence facing mental health.**



Photo: Filip Orestes

Our HAP has something that just touches your core. A character played relentlessly and endearingly by brilliant British actress Vanessa Poole as the overly happy Angie, better known as HAP. Why? Because she cannot stop laughing, and even in front of adversity, she just laughs at it all.

Opposite her is Dr. Martha Marples, the serious, solemn, self-absorbed physician that HAP wants to consult in order to get rid of her burdensome happiness because people around her seem to disagree with her bursts of laughter and light outlook on life. The doctor's role is performed with earnest precision by Jana Pulkrabek, and as things go on, the audience experiences the doctor's craving for sweets, control, and feelings of superiority—balance of mind and professional life are on the scale. In HAP, Martha finds contagious laughter, positivity, and unforeseen romance. Yes, the doctor seems to become the patient, and gloominess vanishes, or just as well, we may conclude that life just keeps happening.



*Photo: Filip Orestes*



*Photo: Jens-Peter Saul*

John Foster's latest theatre piece, 'HAP', brings forth a delightful concoction of unending glee, profound observations in the guise of light laughter, and unexpected dialogues. Set against the bustling backdrop of modern urban life, the play cleverly dissects the intricate dance between happiness and heavy melancholy, all wrapped in a blanket of absurd comedic play that keeps the audience hooked from start to finish.

***"Equilibrant performances, effortlessly embodying the starkly contrasting personas of their characters".***

At the epicentre of the narrative, we meet these two captivating characters: HAP, a perpetually joyous, quirky woman seeking relief from her unyielding feeling of happiness, and Martha, the therapist grappling with her own elusive pursuit of joy. Vanessa Poole and Jana Pulkrabek truly deliver equilibrant performances, effortlessly embodying the starkly contrasting personas of their characters and eliciting both chuckles, outbursts of laughter, and empathy from the audience.

Director Paul Glaser's keen eye for detail and comedic-dramatic timing shine through in every scene, seamlessly guiding the audience through a rollercoaster of emotions. The effective set design by JP ManusArts sets the stage for the absurd to unfold, while the dynamic light and sound design by Glaser enhances the whimsical atmosphere of the play.

HAP is now playing in the country with one of the world's highest rates of happiness amongst its population, which for most people is synonymous with Copenhagen being the capital of 'happiness', as several reports have shown over the years. Even though it seems like a challengeable premise for this Danish reviewer, who lives here permanently, or for any other visitor observing passing-by average Danish faces during wintertime, realising that the concept of happiness may rather be utterly overrated when confronted with reality.

***"This theatre piece is a testament to contemporaneity with themes that revolve around modern society and the individual's existential struggles".***

What makes 'HAP' truly unique is its ability to balance moments of poignant reflection. Under the veneer of comedy, dramatic scenes evolve into a pungent exploration of human yearning and the unending pursuit of happiness, just because we are told that this is the emotion we must pursue as a species, even at a high human cost. In a world that often feels devoid of meaningfulness, the absurd seems to be the way to go in order to unveil the eclatantly missing self-reflection urban life entails.

So what happens when it's the other way around? What does happen when people of all ages seem to struggle with daily life and the feeling of happiness imposed by society? We know for a fact that the pandemic actually changed the way humans interact, after which we all woke up to a new state of being. And there is no going back from the pandemic blues. If anything, when reflecting on national and global politics, Brexit, the wars nearby, climate change, and the rising of the seas only leave most of us unhappy and heartbroken. Needless to say, all of this affects even more individuals with serious mental illness who, along with everybody else, have every reason to seek medical assistance and often do not find the appropriate care and treatment due to ill-equipped, overburdened health institutions. These are some of the themes spectators may encounter during the play. Despite the jokes, the dancing, and the singing, the contrast remains, as we find ourselves laughing one moment and pondering life's deeper questions the next.

Following a successful world premiere at The English Theatre of Hamburg, 'HAP' now plays, as a guest production, in vibrant Vesterbro at the Copenhagen city theatre, 'Teatret ved Sorte Hest', an absolutely cosy stage with an embracing atmosphere truly worth a visit. This theatre piece is a testament to contemporaneity with themes that revolve around modern society and the individual's existential struggles, such as isolation, loneliness, depression, LGBT relations, and the feeling of 'otherness'.

However, it also renders a powerful cross-border collaboration between HIT International Theatre Arts (Denmark) and ManusArts GmbH, teamed up with The English Theatre of Hamburg (Germany), who together are bringing captivating stories to new audiences.

In just 60 minutes, 'HAP' manages to leave a lasting impression, drawing audiences into a world where laughter and heartache intertwine in the most unexpected ways. Whether you're in search of a good laugh or a thought-provoking theatrical experience, 'HAP' promises to deliver on all fronts. This is a chance to catch this comedic/dramatic gem.

A categorical must-see!

## How to make it as an English-language theatre creative in Copenhagen

After showing in one of Copenhagen's oldest and best-loved venues, we take a look at British editor and writer Ben Hamilton's debut play 'Don't Mention the War', and what it takes to go from page to stage as an English-language theatre creative in Denmark, with insights from some of the most established actors and producers in the scene.



Members of the cast, production and friends of 'Don't Mention the War', written by Ben Hamilton and performed at Teatret Ved Sorte Hest on 3 June 2024. Photo: Hasse Ferrold  
[LENA HUNTER](#) AUG 12, 2024

You can feel the vintage of Teatret Ved Sorte Hest from the moment you enter.

Tucked behind a black door in a leafy Vesterbro courtyard, the tiny foyer, with an elegant chessboard floor and mini chandeliers, is just big enough for a group of friends to gather before they're blocking the doorway.

On the walls is a muddle of black and white photographs of famous actors, scenographers, and writers – the many Danish and English talents who have cut their teeth here since the 1970s. To the left, an arthritic stairwell curves up to the tiny, 88-seat theatre above.

[Hesten](#), as it is affectionately known, is not only one of Copenhagen's oldest and most intimate stages – it's also one of its greatest strongholds of English-language theatre.

Tonight the place is thronged with guests. Many are actors, producers and writers, here for a staged reading of [Don't Mention the War](#) – the debut by British playwright Ben Hamilton, ex-editor of *The Copenhagen Post*.

It's produced by [HIT International Theatre Arts](#), a bastion of English theatre in Denmark, in collaboration with the international cross-border-festival [Move the North](#).

There is much jovial backslapping, hugging and handshaking going on – a testament to the close-knit community of the international scene.

### **International relations on the Danish stage**

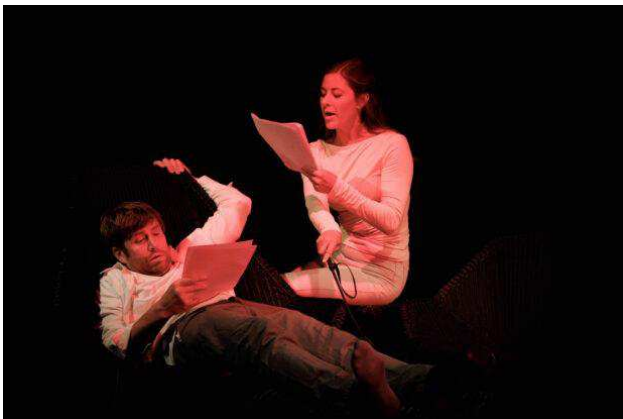
Community is important tonight: though he's a longtime stage reviewer, it's Hamilton's first time stepping into the limelight as a stage creative.

In *Don't Mention the War*, he gives us a trio of cutting satires on war in Europe and Brexit. The audience meets three couples, variously flirting, reminiscing, bickering or all-out rowing, who personify the last half century's landmark political negotiations.

A loved-up young couple in bed, Steven and Janne, represent the 1972 Treaty of Accession, as they eagerly speculate about the future of Denmark and the UK in the European Community.

A pair of will-they-won't-they lovers, Britain and Argentina, dramatise the Falklands War of 1982. Seated either side of a chessboard, the pair erupt in a vicious, passionate spat. They alternate between squabbling over the footstool (the Maldives), making exuberant overtures, bragging about their exes, and hurling insults.

Finally, a mid-40's Michael, representing Britain, and his mid 20's girlfriend Persephone, representing Europe, grapple with his decision to cryogenically freeze himself to (Br)exit the relationship, without paying the consequences.



*The characters in Ben Hamilton's 'Don't Mention the War'. Photo: J.P.S./HIT International TheatreArts*

In terms of performing English language, *Don't Mention the War* is a gymnast. It's stuffed with political witticisms, erotic wordplay, and literary references. Take, for example, a scene in which a dominatrix Europe circles a tied-up Britain, pondering whether to deliver the "bendy cucumber of Brussels", or the "hard yellow dildo of EU law."

It's dense – there's barely a second for a political metaphor to catch its breath before Hamilton has it doing flips again – and a little heavy-handed at times, but rollicking fun.

For a Brit audience, it's unflinchingly dark, too – full of musings on the UK's self-destruction, COVID, and the long shadow of imperialism. Hamilton relishes twisting the knife: "Great Britain," spits Argentina in the second act, "is the biggest oxymoron of all time." Though the tone might be deadpan, the structure is light-footed. Hamilton flips the script from historical to magical realism on a dime, without losing any of the narrative thrust. Having seen so much English theatre in Copenhagen over the years, he knows he's steering in a different direction.

"Most plays are boring and old: aimed at a small percentage of people. It's our duty in theatre to engage audiences and switch them onto the thrill of live performance," he says, adding that his favourite shows to watch always have "intensity, dark humour and something fresh".

### **Making it as an English playwright**

Hamilton's work showed during Copenhagen's summer theatre festival [CPH Stage](#) – an annual mixing pot of bold new theatre productions, both Danish and international. But from page to stage, a play can take years to come to fruition. You'd think *Don't Mention the War* was inspired by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But Hamilton in fact started two years earlier, basing the story on a poem he wrote for his aunt's funeral in 2019. "It had been a while since I wrote it, or even thoroughly read it, so I was happy it hadn't dated at all. The themes, given the state of Britain today and war breaking out on the continent, are as relevant as ever," says Hamilton.

As an English playwright, getting your work staged is tough, and funding is hard to come by, says producer of *Don't Mention the War* and founder and artistic director of HIT, Jana Pulkrabek. She is well placed to compare Denmark's scene with neighbouring countries'; Pulkrabek is deeply involved in cross-border theatre – not only through HIT, but as artistic director of Move the North, and CEO of the Hamburg-based film-and theatre company [ManusArts](#). "One of the big issues for English language theatre creatives in Copenhagen is the challenge of finding performance venues to present their craft. And it's not getting easier," she says.

Hamilton agrees: "I'm not sure I could do it myself. I'm grateful to Jana Pulkrabek and Vanessa Poole from HIT International Theatre Arts for their support and networking. They assembled actors, directors, crew and a musician – top notch production values all round."

To get a foothold in the arts scene in Copenhagen, Pulkrabek says personal contact is the way to go: "Approach people and be flexible. As theatre makers, we are always in search of good and accessible material to perform and to work with more and more colleagues of calibre."

British Sue Hansen-Styles is a self-taught actor who came to Denmark in 2001 with her Danish husband. In 2007, she co-founded [Why Not Theatre Company](#) (WNTC). She points out that WNTC's in-house playwright, Tanja Mastilo, got her start in theatre through personal contact. Actively presenting her work to other creatives was the key, she says. "Tanja asked me to read her short stories many years ago and I was so taken with her writing style and talent that we created a new, devised production based on those short stories." "Since then, she has gone on to write a monologue, a podcast, many full-length plays for Why Not, and in 2021 she won Årets Reumert as playwright of the year!"

### **Making it as an English producer**

Hansen-Styles, who art directs one full-staged English theatre production and several pop-ups for WNTC per season in Copenhagen, has always focused on new and experimental works.



Daring to think out of the box and take risks can pay off for an aspiring producer, she says. “To be successful you need a clear vision, a strong team around you and an obstinate refusal to compromise on quality – whether it is the quality of your team, or the quality of the paper used for your programmes.” But it’s no easy road and budgets are tight, she admits. “Producing professional English language theatre in Denmark is, and I suspect always will be, a challenge. Quality is not up for discussion, but quality requires money and raising funds is hard work.”

Building a strong relationship with a venue is pivotal. Jana Pulkrabek, for example, calls Hesten a “home” for HIT. Consistently delivering quality theatre means the venue is more likely to accept risk-taking, which can allow new talents to enter the scene. “I feel extremely happy to have found such well-loved stage for HIT to perform on. We are looking forward to our third season of collaboration with Hesten, a great privilege.”

“It is also one of the many great reasons why I wanted to put up Ben Hamilton’s play. Three one-act playlets with a cast of seven actors offered the opportunity to share this wonderful theatre venue with a large group of extremely talented artists.”

### **Making it as an English actor**

Vanessa Poole, brand associate for HIT, co-founder of the Danish production company [Down the Rabbithole Theatre](#) and founder of Malmö-based [Playmate](#), says that the scene is evolving for English-speaking actors. In the past decade, one or two private Danish drama schools have launched acting diplomas in English, drawing young acting students to Copenhagen. They are raising the standard, she says. “It’s cheaper than going to drama school in the UK or the US, and much easier to get in. These young hopefuls are forming their own little drama groups in English, in the evenings, being inventive, desperate to work. They are taking it seriously.”

While Poole cautions that big-budget productions filming in Denmark who need English-speakers “can always fly in models/actors from London and LA if they want to”, there is still scope, with a little luck, for an English actor in Copenhagen to get a big role.

“My sometime stage colleague in Copenhagen, actor Alex Lehman played an American in *Carmen Curlers* on Danish TV. Tom Hale, who has acted for us at HIT several times, played an American ambassador in feature film *Hammar skjöld*. So, English-language roles do happen occasionally!” Aspiring playwrights and actors should get in touch with HIT International Theatre Arts in Denmark or Playmate in Sweden. “Call me!” she says. “We look for theatre-makers who have talent, training, experience – ideally all three!”

### **Do it for the love**

Though theatre in Denmark won’t make you “rich or famous” says Poole, she wouldn’t change it. “I love doing it. Theatre for me is where I am most myself. There is nothing else I would rather do.”

Pulkrabek agrees. “It is amazing how much fun you share together with fellow actors and the audience,” she says. Looking back on the comedy *HAP*, which she co-produced with Poole for Hesten in 2024, she remembers the audience cracking up every single night. “It was the best reward!” she says.

Poole’s fondest stage memories are also of raucous, exuberant fun: like the international version of *Det Kolde Bord*, which she calls a “48-hour chaos theatre project”. “It really was a meeting between Danish and non-Danish actors on stage on equal terms, with all of us

laughing and sweating to pull together in just two days. All of us sharing one language, one experience, for a packed audience.”

“I really feel it was a moment of triumph – perhaps unique – when Danish speakers and English speakers met to act together live. Whether you trained in London or Copenhagen, it made no difference that day. It was fabulous.” Now is an exciting time for theatre arts she says, with new ideas finding wings. “I think the visual quality of costume and scenography in live theatre seems to be getting bolder and more inventive, more exciting in Copenhagen.”

Hamilton is one of the latest new creatives to take the leap. Seeing his work performed was “very exciting” he says, and a second play is in the works. Despite the hurdles to theatrical success in Denmark, the thrill of the stage is undeniable.



## VOICES FROM THE SHADOWS

4 out of 5 ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

*“My most beautiful play since Streetcar, the very heart of my life.” – Tennessee Williams*

**Miming shadows and a tormentous sibling relation: A Bold Reimagining of *The Two-Character Play*. On mental states, despair, dystopian artistic creation, and the mind’s fragility. Is reality just an imagination game? Or does imagination merge with reality?**

Playmate Theatre in Malmö, in collaboration with H I T (Hamburg Copenhagen Malmö) International Theatre Art, brings a refreshing and innovative staging of Tennessee Williams’s *The Two-Character Play*, reinterpreting this complex work with a contemporary lens. Known for its intricate exploration of sibling dynamics, isolation, and the blurred lines between performance and reality, the play is a daring choice for any company. This production rises to the challenge with a bold directorial vision by Lars Junggreen, a stellar cast, played relentlessly by Vanessa Poole and Andreas Lyon; and a fresh perspective that revitalises Williams’s poignant script.

At its heart, *The Two-Character Play* is a story about Clare and Felice, actor siblings stranded in an abandoned theatre, trying desperately to stage a performance after their troupe deserts them. The meta-theatrical narrative blurs distinctions between actor and character, art and reality, leaving audiences to question what is real and what is a façade. Here we are presented with a play within the play. Bastionen’s production not only embraces this ambiguity but amplifies it, introducing an ensemble of four mimes who act as shadows, reflections, and amplifications of the siblings’ emotions. This means that within the meta-

narrative we encounter a beta-über-surreal narrative. This is the part that surprises and amazes.

### **About the Author's Motives**

The Two-Character Play (also known as *Out Cry*) premiered in London at the Hampstead Theatre in December 1967. Tennessee Williams's life (1911–1983), with an upbringing in the South of the USA, was marked by profound struggles that deeply influenced his *Southern Gothic* writing. Raised in a strict religious household, he grappled with his sexuality and rebelled against the conservative values of his family.

His family life was fractured—his father was abusive, and his beloved sister, Rose, underwent a lobotomy that left her institutionalised, a loss that haunted him throughout his life. This longing for connection with his sister, combined with his own battles with identity, substance abuse, and mental health, became the emotional foundation of *The Two-Character Play*. It is a deeply personal exploration of isolation, familial bonds, and the fragile line between reality and illusion.

### **A Haunting Meta Interpretation**

Vanessa Poole delivers a passionately inventive performance, showcasing an unwavering commitment to her craft. Her portrayal of Clare is both raw and nuanced, capturing the character's fragility and fiery determination with captivating authenticity. Andreas Lyon, as Felice, brings a quiet intensity to the stage, grounding the sibling dynamic with a measured yet deeply affecting presence. Together, they find balance, and create a magnetic interplay, driving the emotional core of the production.

The mimes, a creative addition to Williams's original work, are more than silent witnesses; they are integral to the play's emotional and psychological landscape. Moving fluidly between roles as reflections of Clare's torment and Felice's inner struggles, they echo the siblings' mental states, sometimes with unnerving synchronicity. These figures bring a heightened sense of unease and surrealism, embodying the invisible forces—grief, despair, substance abuse, childhood trauma, fear, and memory—all of which drive Clare and Felice to the brink.

Clare, portrayed with electrifying intensity, is followed most closely by these shadow-like presences. They amplify her emotions, often mirroring her gestures or silently interacting with her. Felice, too, is shadowed, with moments of interaction that highlight his own unraveling. The mimes pass papers and act from the shadows with the siblings, blurring the lines between the tangible and the imagined. Their presence enhances the meta-theatrical nature of the play, and becomes a beta-narrative transforming the stage into a liminal space where the audience, actors, and characters are all part of an intricate dance of imagination, disillusion and truth.

### **A Contemporary Take**

This production does not shy away from adapting elements of the play to align with modern sensibilities. Several lines have been adjusted, bringing a contemporary resonance to the dialogue. Clare, in particular, is portrayed with a strength and complexity that feels distinctly

modern, while still remaining true to the fragility Williams imbued in her character. By reframing certain moments and shifting perspectives, this interpretation breathes new life into the play, making it accessible to a 21st-century audience without compromising its original essence.

The themes of isolation and the search for connection feel especially poignant in a post-pandemic world, where theatre itself has grappled with its own survival. The production's focus on Clare as a multifaceted figure—both vulnerable and defiant—offers a timely commentary on contemporary views of women and mental health, enriching the narrative with layers of relevance.

### **Direction That Captivates**

The director's approach is clever, weaving together elements of comedy, tragedy, and psychological horror to create a truly immersive experience. The pacing is taut, ensuring that even the few slower, introspective moments are imbued with a sense of tension. The interplay between the siblings and the mimes is choreographed neatly and with precision, by Mariana Araoz, each movement and interaction serving to deepen the audience's engagement with the story.

The set and lighting design work effectively, reinforcing the play's themes of entrapment and ambiguity. Subtle shifts in lighting and sound heighten the tension, while the diffuse set serves as a fitting backdrop for the emotional and psychological drama unfolding on stage.

### **A Celebration of Theatre**

What better way to celebrate theatre's than with a play about the art form itself? *The Two-Character Play* is a work that examines the vulnerabilities of performers, the boundaries of fiction, and the resilience of the human spirit. PLAYMATE THEATRE MALMÖ's interpretation captures these themes forcefully, reminding us of theatre's unique power to reflect, challenge, and move us.

This production is more than a take on Williams' genius; it is an experience. By embracing the play's surrealism and adding innovative elements, the ensemble has created an interpretation that is both faithful to Williams's vision and refreshingly original.

### **A Must-See for Theatre Enthusiasts**

The play shows a circular balance, representing the mind's whirlwind of chaos anchored by moments of clarity—a motif that weaves the piece until it ends. This is theatre at its most daring—intimate, unsettling, and unforgettable expression.