

The Herald
Playing Houses, Arches, Glasgow
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Star rating: ****

Like much of his previous work, Martin O'Connor's *Playing Houses* explores 21st-century masculinity through monologue, yet it is a bold step forward for the writer-director. Whereas *Reality*, his 2007 piece for Glasgay, saw him perform three linked monologues, this Glasgay/Arches co-commission is his first full-length play and the first to feature actors other than himself.

It's the warm, sticky evening of the *Big Brother* final. Neither deserted mother Sandra (Vivien Grahame) nor her three sons have been keeping up with the series, but they'll each watch the spectacle from their own rooms – that is, until their hitherto AWOL father makes an appearance.

The scenario functions as a springboard from which to investigate four experiences of gender – or five, if you count that of Da, whose absence gives him a kind of all-pervasive presence.

Sandra feels washed up at 36, oldest son Wee Andy (Jordan McCurrach) is facing fatherhood himself, Michael (Neil Leiper) has been involved in a homophobic attack and confused youngster Sean (Scott Fletcher) attempts to solve his problems through daytime TV. All are searching for validation and belonging, something not afforded them either outside or inside the home, where Kirsty McCabe's simple, four-piece set solidifies their separateness.

Indeed, the only occasions where the monologues threaten to give way to dialogue are fatally - frustrated: the four literally cannot communicate with each other. Yet the tension never suffocates the humour – and nor does that humour detract from the gravity. O'Connor's growth as a writer makes for compelling viewing, as well as a climax few will see coming.