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PLAYING HOUSES ****

THE ARCHES, GLASGOW

THINK OF Glasgay! – Glasgow’s annual multi-arts festival for queer people and their friends – and lots of things come to mind: visual razzle-dazzle, cutting-edge performance art, and passionate reworkings of classic texts by gay writers. Fine new writing, though, has tended to come further down the list, until now. So it’s a pleasure to find that the first of this year’s new Glasgay! plays – co-commissioned by the Festival and the Arches – is a strikingly powerful quadruple monologue, that confirms its writer, Martin O’Connor, as an important emerging talent.

Playing Houses is an 80-minute reflection on the fate of a family of three boys who – along with their feisty mother, Sandra – have been abandoned by their father, Big Andy. Using these four voices, O’Connor first reflects on their experience, and then moves the drama on through the fateful day when Big Andy chooses to return for a visit, raising a series of profound questions about fatherhood, masculinity, family and belonging in a blasted post-industrial landscape. Sandra is an unforgettable character, beautifully played by Vivien Grahame: a failed working-class matriarch with a poetic turn of phrase, a surreal sense of humour, and a searingly sharp eye for the strangeness of her world.

The tragedy, when it comes, is slightly ill-prepared; a horrific gay-bashing incident emerges suddenly from the chaos of the family’s life. But the quality of the writing, in a sharp but lyrical Glasgow demotic, never fails. And Jordan McCurrach, Neil Leiper and Scott Fletcher are all in fine form as Sandra’s three boys; the teenage dad, the young thug and the gay schoolkid, all lost in a world that was short of waymarks even before their Dad walked out, ripping the heart from their lives.