

THE TIMES REVIEW OF LIKE A FISHBONE

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Ignore the baffling title (it's from a Robert Lowell poem). Anthony Weigh's play is a gem; simple but deep. Two women, ludicrously different, meet against a back story drawn strongly from Dunblane. A mass shooting in a village school has drawn attention from a busybody world and a memorial is planned. Its elegant architect is played with fabulous disdain by Deborah Findlay.

The set is her office, with the usual soulless white paper tabletop model. In the little auditorium we are flies on the wall, breathless as the emotion rises. For into this mannerly art world blunders a dishevelled, half-blind woman. She is the mother of a murdered child, come south on the bus to oppose the plan: which is (oh, the artful chill of it!) to preserve the school as it was that day: "Every upturned desk, every dropped pencil case, every crushed crayon". The south wall, naturally, is "reimagined in glass" as a "place of contemplation for the wider public".

Findlay is horribly credible, spouting jargon about stakeholders, project boards and "process". The mother, played with gritty sincerity by Sarah Smart, just wants the school razed to the ground and something inspiring put in its place. She relates how, during the siege, parents in the car park sang hymns and heard small voices joining in, then shots and fewer voices.

The horror is brief: Weigh does not harrow us for the sake of it, but to serve the arguments that evolve as the temperature rises. His handling of incoherence is particularly fine: polemic alternating with strangled half-sentences, interruptions, silences, exclamations.

What begins as a blackly comic clash of a simple countrywoman and an urban sophisticate rapidly expands. It sets raw tragedy against the professionals who feed on it (journalists know that unease). As the mother's religion becomes evident, it widens into a philosophical battle between civilised humanism that seeks only to record, versus a fundamentalist demand for meaning and beauty.

As Findlay — with nice symbolism — struggles vainly to open the windows, she can only witter about her firm's "nuanced process", while Smart in magnificent passion clutches the paper model and demands more of the Universe.

As *Like a Fishbone* tips into melodrama, intermittent light relief is provided by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, perfect as a dopey, posh intern. Her final speech ("A building is not an idea, it's a utensil") is a tentative bridge between two worlds.