

By [Professor Steve Bottoms](#) at the Edinburgh Festival 2018

It was a real pleasure to be present for **Talkin' About My Generation**, performed in the Richard Demarco Archive at Summerhall last week. This was a beautifully low key piece of work. Although a number of props and objects were used throughout (from free-standing woodwork numbers, arranged to form year dates, to handmade woolly hats, distributed to willing audience members!), the piece was nonetheless mostly kept so minimal in performance terms that it seemed barely more than people in a room talking. It was the understated guile and wit of the whole thing, though, that made clear just how carefully constructed it was.

The audience was welcomed into the room at the beginning to find a chairs placed along all four walls, facing the middle of the space, and we entered wandering what exactly to expect. It was only after a minute or so chatting with the friendly older woman that my friend and I had sat down next to (she was sporting spectacular yellow feather earrings) that I realised she was going to be one of the performers -- or indeed, already was. Then, as the piece "proper" announced itself with an intro of rhyming couplets, each of the other performers spoke out from amongst the audience members they were sitting with. This disarming opening was then followed by a series of short scenes and vignettes in which we got to know something about these "ageing" performers (aren't we all ageing, all the time?) and where they come from, what they like to do, what they think about... They had had a range of roles in life, lived in a number of places, and seemed to range from the straight-laced to the bohemian. Politics came up, inevitably -- and particularly the Brexit debate (a seemingly inescapable theme wherever you went at this year's Fringe). Yet intriguingly, we never quite knew who stood where on the spectrum of views outlined. It became clear, as more and more opinions were offered, that several of the performers were offering views that directly contradicted what they had said seconds previously: that they were reciting collected quotations rather than confessing their own positions. Any temptation one might have had to judge or dislike a person based on their politics was thus neatly skewered. Instead, there was a sense of simply getting to know each of these people in all their quirky, endearing individuality -- although of course they might all have been simply "acting" all of it. This was the realm of gentle uncertainty we'd entered into...

It was somehow rather lovely to be reminded that we can be uncertain and yet not feel anxious about it. As if to highlight this, a sense of quite genuine anxiety was ingeniously cranked up during a couple of moments in the performance, only to be cleverly allayed. Towards the end of the piece, for example, there was a furious banging on the door that really did have me believing for a few moments that the missing performer mentioned at the start had found his way back and was angrily trying to batter his way back into a show that had managed without him. It gradually became clear, of course, that this was all staged, and the joke was on us (after decades of performance-going, it was rather nice to find I could still be conned this easily). In other, subtler moments, I remained (and remain) unsure as to whether what we saw was spontaneous or rehearsed. When Teresa gently helped Noel Witts out of a hole when he had mixed up his lines... had he really mixed up his lines at all? I can't be certain...

After the piece had ended, with the sounds of the exiting performers playfully disappearing off down the corridor outside, there was a perfect epilogue. Everyone came back into the room, and another elderly man spoke up from where he had been sitting quietly, throughout. It became clear that this was Richard Demarco himself, legend of the Edinburgh Fringe, who had -- he told us -- been present at all 72 festivals to date. His few, spontaneous words of appreciation (or were they rehearsed? who can be certain...?) worked as a moving, microcosmic reiteration of what we'd witnessed during the previous 45 minutes.

In a word? Lovely.