

Hooked at Sweet Grassmarket

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Nicky Guadagni gives voice to seven infamous women from the 20th century, including Myra Hindley and Unity Mitford. Nicky Guadagni has hit on an interesting solution to the dearth of meaty roles for women in the theatre. In bringing Carolyn Smart's book of narrative poems based on the lives of historical females to the stage, the Canadian performer has provided herself with seven choice parts for the price of one.

The resulting show is intense, at times alarmingly close to the bone, but highly accomplished. Smart's disparate monologues give voice to tales of obsession, thwarted desires and ambition frustrated by illness and addiction. The piece opens with dark recollections from a ghostly Myra Hindley, who describes her remains being put in the ground "like radioactive waste". We hear from a series of women whose reputations were defined by the men they loved, including Unity Mitford, pilloried for her friendship with Hitler, and the Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart, who had four children with a married poet.

Guadagni, who played Miranda to Paul Scofield's Prospero in the West End, but hasn't been seen on British stages for years, is mesmerizing. In a stripped-down show, with only a chair borrowed from a nearby café as a prop, she achieves some uncanny physical transformations.

At first hunched and barking out clipped reminiscences in Hindley's 40-a-day Gorton accent, Guadagni then stretches her body and face out to full length for her turn as Mitford. Later, she balances on her chair at a perilous angle to inhabit the stroke-crippled body of American writer Carson McCullers. It's hard to imagine many others with the dexterity to pull off such an intense piece.

Granted, there's little in the way of light relief, but *Hooked* makes for compulsive viewing, both as fascinating biography and for the sheer pleasure of seeing a consummate stage performer hold her audience in the palm of her hand.