

Edinburgh festival



Theatre

Novecento

Royal Lyceum

Edinburgh

Rating: **

Special report: Edinburgh Festival 2001**Michael Billington**

The Guardian, Friday 17 August 2001 00.00 BST

One-person shows are everywhere this Edinburgh. This one, written by Alessandro Baricco, performed by Tom McCamus and presented by Montreal's Théâtre de Quat'Sous as part of the international festival, is a triumph of style over content. It is a tall story, smothered in lavish production values and spun out to last nearly two hours.

From the smoky, coal-filled bowels of a ship, a figure emerges to tell us a yarn. The speaker was a trumpeter in a jazz band on a transatlantic liner during the interwar years, which is where he got to know the play's hero, Novecento. Abandoned as a baby under the liner's grand piano at the turn of the century, Novecento was lovingly reared by a steward, and grew up to be a great jazz pianist, but never set foot on land.

The hero, we are told in a sentimental coda, made one bold attempt to quit the liner but, dismayed by the infinity of choice, quickly retreated into his world of pianistic perfection.

The story has one lively passage when Novecento engages in a fictive jazz duel with Jelly Roll Morton. But for the most part this tale is implausible nonsense. It also sanctifies the idea of the reclusive, solitary genius at the expense of the artist who engages with society and the world at large.

No expense has been spared, however, in bringing this thin-textured drivel to life. François Seguin's below-decks design is big enough to accommodate a production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*.

Marc Parent's lighting deploys vast columnar grills, as if this were a Terry Hands history version of Shakespeare. Nancy Tobin's sound design is relentless.

But neither François Girard's operatic production nor McCamus's narration as the marine trumpeter, which belongs more to the world of Harry James than Henry James, can persuade me this is anything more than ersatz drama.

- Ends tomorrow. Box office: 0131-473 2000.

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