



Back in the UK and I spent only a brief time in the flat before heading up to Hackney, and the [Arcola Theatre](#) again, this time for another piece of new theatre, “Double Portrait” written and directed by Tom Shkolnik, a young film maker. This is a two-hander starring Jodie McNeen and Nicole Scott in a tense character study.

The script is spare, the production interesting, and the acting is above par. What is missing is an end — there just isn’t one. The whole piece has the feel of a test, like Shkolnik is trying out some story ideas, and wanted to do so with audience support. The story is simple enough, and all too complex. A pair of sisters are separated by miles, and by lives lived. Nicole is a teacher in London, Jodie is wayward in Liverpool. Jodie is suicidal and misses her sister, who has taken care of her during the ugly split of their parents. Nicole is gaining independence away from home, and just starting to recover from a broken relationship.

To watch these two spiral both towards and away from each other is difficult, but we are drawn. McNeen’s performance as Jodie is haunting and powerful. Her neediness is palpable, and the opening scene literally made me shiver, something which no other theatre experience has done on this trip. Scott’s performance as the more responsible sister is just as moving. She is a giver, in her family, her job and her relationship. In a telling scene she has an awkward visit from her ex, come to pick up his stuff. He wants to comfort her over Jodie, but she finds the strength to send him packing and stand on her own. This is a difficult scene under the best of circumstances, but made more so here by the fact that Scott must play the scene with a non-existent partner.

An especially effective device in this production is the presence of the two characters on the same stage (set by Agnes Treplin) the same space, but separated by hundreds of miles and their own, very different needs. This is especially effective under Neil Brinkworth’s thoughtful lighting design. These sisters do need each other, and the director makes us feel this deeply by placing them so close together on the stage while the distances between them grow.

This is a good bit of theatre, but it is only a bit. Presented in the smaller Studio 2 of Arcola’s unique energy-efficient building, such a short and as yet under realised production really should have been promoted more as a work in progress, and billed accordingly. The performances and directing would hold a longer show well, all that’s needed is the rest of the script.