




## EDINBURGH 2023: Review: 17 MINUTES, Gilded Balloon

An emotional look into the aftermath of gun violence and the consequences of inaction is a Fringe standout in a festival dominated by comedy.

By: L Gourley Aug. 08, 2023

An emotional exploration into the aftermath of US gun violence, **Scott Organ's** original production *17 Minutes* asks the question: what can be expected of the "good guy with a gun" in a culture where violence and the tools used to inflict it seem only to get bigger? Can one individual's lack of action truly be to blame for tragedy in a society and political climate that is full of inaction? An inaction that spans years and multiple tragedies, not simply 17 minutes. 

Set "somewhere in suburban America" – driving home the ubiquity of the themes covered in the play – *17 minutes* explores the consequences of on-duty deputy Andy Rubens (**Larry Mitchell**) and his failure to confront a mass shooter in the school in which he's stationed. Mitchell does a fantastic job of moving from the agitated deputy in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, as he gives his statement to Detective Vigil Morris (**Brian Rojas**), to dejected town pariah as details of the incident come under public scrutiny. An unreliable narrator from the beginning, Rubens is unwavering in his stance that he simply acted as he was trained to do, but his initial statement is inconsistent against the facts. Almost every detail from the number of suspected shooters, the location, and crucially the length of time he waits between radioing in the situation and being removed by SWAT does not match the timeline of events.

His discrepancies highlight the chaos of such situations rather than acting as a deliberate misrepresentation – the initial uncertainty of where the shots are coming from, how many voices belong to assailants versus victims, and what weaponry is being used. Despite repeatedly denying freezing in fear, Rubens references past events like the infamous Las Vegas shooting in 2017, having believed the shooter may have been on the roof. In the cold aftermath of the tragedy, Detective Morris points out how implausible that scenario is in a school setting and Rubens agrees, but it contextualises the landscape Rubens was working in. A place and time where every day citizens can be armed with weaponry capable of killing tens or hundreds in a matter of minutes. What could one deputy with one standard issue firearm do against someone with an assault rifle?

Yet Rubens is never quite a sympathetic character. *17 Minutes* does not seek to justify nor does it fully condemn his behaviour. His later conversation with colleague Mary (**Shannon Patterson**) – who did subdue the shooter – hears her recount her version of events. Her description of the wounded children, of what a weapon like an assault rifle can do to people, and even her own interactions with the shooter are harrowing. In this conversation the audience comes to understand piece by piece what was happening as Rubens sat motionless behind a wall for close to twenty minutes. It feels indefensible. His lack of accountability feels like callousness towards the victims, his thoughts predominantly on his own career and rarely on those of the families affected by the tragedy. We know that despite his protestations however, there is a real sense of guilt eating at Rubens. He projects it onto each of the characters he interacts with, sensing judgement in every

sigh or clearing of a throat, and every carelessly worded platitude. His obsessive cleaning of the gun he never fired parallels that of Lady Macbeth as she tries to wash the blood from her hands. Andy Rubens is neither the villain nor the victim of this story, he is simply a person dealing with the fallout of one choice. One choice with no way to know if another would have changed the outcome or simply added to the body count.

What strikes most about *17 Minutes* is that despite the topic and the depths of emotion on display, it never strays into melodrama. There's no sense of over-acting, no hyperbolic dialogue, and the build to its emotional climax is steady and well-paced. In fact, the emotion comes from how grounded in realism it is. These characters feel like accurate representations of the people they reflect, and their interactions feel human, even offering the odd dry humour remark you'd expect in real life conversations. The attention to detail with body language is superb across the entire cast and in each scene. It's in the small things like Samantha Rubens ([DeAnna Lenhart](#)) tying her hair back in frustration mid-conversation at the kitchen table as she tries to clear her head and make a plan, or Vigil Morris' calm sips of coffee as he examines the case file in front of him whilst Andy Rubens fidgets back and forth in his seat from across the desk. Their small movements take them from characters to people in every tense conversation or disappointed reflection.

The standout performance is [Lee Brock](#) as grieving mother Cecilia Bauserman, evoking tears from the audience with her rage-filled and nihilistic soliloquy as she seeks to apportion blame to every individual and system that led to her son's murder. It's made all the more powerful by the knowledge that this speech and her tears represent so many real people across the US impacted by such violence. [Michael Giese](#)'s portrayal of the perpetrator's father, Dan Watson, gives a contrasting delivery; he is a man who hides his pain behind a glib and semi-confrontational front. Despite never sharing a scene, these two complement each other well. She is rage and grief personified in the wake of losing her son, he carries the regret of what his son has done and what he himself could have done differently.

Allison Parker and [Edward T. Morris](#) (stage and set manager, respectively) compensate well for their limited set resource, effectively creating changing landscapes and relationships through creative re-purposing of set pieces, lighting ([Peter Small](#)), and character movement across the small stage. The opening scene is cold, bleak, and grey and it sets the tone of the play before a single line is spoken.

*17 Minutes* is a well-crafted and emotional piece, elevated by its attention to detail in both stage design and in the cast's performance as they bring a devastated community and fraught relationships to life. Rubens' slow spiral as he copes with the consequences of his choices is paced to perfection, with exceptional performances by the cast as a whole. A standout in a sea of comedic pieces, *17 Minutes* is an excellent and moving addition to The Edinburgh Festival Fringe.