

The Guardian

“Money bites in deeply felt family drama”

Kate Wyver

★★★★

Franz Xaver Kroetz’s play is a sharp exploration of the way finances wriggle their way into the existing rifts of everyday life

What quiet, splintering performances. Starting as a light-hearted portrait of a charming family, this 1978 play devolves into a deeply felt character study of three individuals pulling unhappily in different directions. Written by German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz and translated by Estella Schmid and Anthony Vivis, this production of *Tom Fool* is a gentle exploration of the way money wriggles its way into the existing rifts of everyday life, adding pressure until they crack.

At the head of the family is aggravating Otto, a car mechanic played with a remarkable elasticity by Michael Shaeffer, at once utterly proud and deeply unhappy in himself. Putting up with him is Anna Francolini’s unruffleable Martha, longing to find a life beyond housework and orders. Lounging around them is son Ludwig (Jonah Rzeskiewicz), desperate to forge his own path.

Kroetz beautifully writes jolts of everyday life in this family, as days are derailed by the ordinary things that worry away at us. These fragments start sparse and comedic, but gain weight as we go on, with work and worth becoming inextricably intertwined.

Conversations about money run through every outing and argument, with every single mark accounted for. Special meals out are ruined by fears of being duped by the waiters, and when they watch the royal wedding on television, all Otto can think of is how much it cost. Pride is a key player too, as Ludwig wants to get a job as a bricklayer to start earning his own money, but Otto refuses to let his son become “just” a worker like him; they have to be seen to be going up in the world. When Otto rages and messes up the house, Martha measures the financial damage.

Diyan Zora’s production is soft and tactile, with every nervous glance adding to our understanding of the family’s shifting dynamics. On a naturalistic set designed by Zoë Hurwitz, with brown fold-out sofa and ceiling fan, the realism is interrupted with flashes of projected scene titles. These add another touch of humour to the already sharp comedy of their conversations.

Tom Fool is an astute realisation of the limits of class, of dissatisfaction, and the failure to achieve childhood dreams. But as the characters focus increasingly on the way their jobs define them in this capitalist world, Martha and Ludwig start to break out of the other boundaries they’re restricted by. Equal parts bleak and funny, Zora has staged a tender portrayal of a finely drawn family struggling to weigh up what their love is worth.

The Times

“A gem from a playwright we should know more about”

Donald Hutera

★★★★

Despite Franz Xaver Kroetz’s status as one of the most important and prolific European playwrights, his work is rarely produced in the UK. While it may be too much to expect of Diyan Zora’s production of *Tom Fool* to change that, her staging of Kroetz’s devastating

1978 domestic drama is good enough — taut, unexpectedly funny and moving — to make me long to see a lot more of the German-born septuagenarian’s work.

Of course, it helps when you cast Anna Francolini, Michael Shaeffer and Jonah Rzeskiewicz in the roles of Martha, Otto and Ludwig — a middle-aged, working-class couple and their adolescent son. The venue is cosy and the seating in the round, exposing the fine actors to constant close scrutiny. Under Zora’s guidance they deliver the goods, capturing not just our attention but our imaginations as well, in performances shot through with a painful beauty. Kroetz’s writing sneaks up on you in a series of relatively short and seemingly clinical scenes, each given its own projected title. He starts us off in Martha and Otto’s home, perfectly realised in Zoë Hurwitz’s design as an environment that is modest, functional and essentially drab. Martha, never idle, keeps it clean. Otto is a semi-skilled labourer on the assembly line of a car factory who, in his spare time, builds large-scale model aircraft. Ludwig, meanwhile, is well behaved but broody and covertly rebellious.

What happens to this oh so typical family hinges on money: a small incident, perhaps, but one that shatters the status quo. The great achievement of Kroetz’s sharply written play, and Zora’s simultaneously fluid and microscopic production of it, is how it allows us to peer into the characters’ inner lives — and pretty deeply too, especially in terms of the two adults — without losing sight of the bigger picture. It is their specificity that illuminates the ideas Kroetz wants to convey about gender expectations, economic entrapment and the tensions that go with them.

Tom Fool is neither sentimental nor didactic about the social issues that underpin it. But what I am most likely to remember are the wonderfully ambivalent feelings engendered by the performances: Shaeffer’s at best semi-articulated aspirations and lonely self-loathing as Otto, the desire for pleasure and the careworn disappointment at its unattainability in Francolini’s Martha, and as Ludwig, Rzeskiewicz’s wounded humiliation at Otto’s splenetic treatment of him in one of the first act’s two key scenes.

The Stage

“Franz Kroetz’s downbeat drama of economics and family dynamics is given vivid life by a trio of strong performances”

Dave Farngioli

★★★★

Set in an era when traditional family dynamics were widely reappraised, and ruthless social climbing was becoming a way of life for many, Tom Fool is one of the prolific German playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz’s most perennially relevant works.

The story centres on the Meier family – semi-skilled factory worker Otto, his wife Martha, and their unemployed teenage son Ludwig – each finding themselves stifled by their expected roles, each struggling to find dignity and relevance on their own terms.

Director Diyan Zora handles Kroetz’s sparse, intricately observed text with precision, never shying away from the agonisingly long silences that pepper the play. Each yawning, awkward stretch is filled with unspoken emotion and meaningful looks – from Ludwig’s glowering stares to Martha’s jittery, near-tearful fretting. A powerful scene in which the parents painstakingly tidy the wreckage of their living room after a violent outburst contains not a word of dialogue or a single aggressive gesture but feels breathlessly intense all the same.

Otto is a recognisably wretched character, struggling under the burden of his own festering resentments, haunted by a nebulous sense of failure. Obsessing over prices and ultimately meaningless status symbols, he narrates a running tally of expenses, not so much because money is tight, but because it's the only method he has of measuring success.

As his family reject the status quo, he tries everything he can to keep them in his power, but all his begging, threats and bids for sympathy only serve to drive them further away.

Michael Shaeffer handles the character's layered complications with great skill, maintaining an air of alienated misery while still making the most of the text's potential for dark comedy with some impeccably timed deliveries.

As Martha, Anna Francolini methodically charts a journey from quietly unfulfilled housewife to separated and self-reliant, taking care to express the doubt and isolation she experiences on the way. Though she might not find any immediate happiness in the new life she embarks upon, there's no doubting her determination to see her decision through.

Beside them, Jonah Rzeskiewicz starts off subdued, as layabout son Ludwig, but begins gaining both confidence and moral awareness as soon as he escapes his father's shadow.

The show's closing scenes, as he visits his estranged parents, are movingly believable – finely pitched between tentative warmth and frosty emotional restraint.

Zoë Hurwitz' design echoes the naturalism of the text, suggesting the Meiers' tenuous but comfortable living condition. Their reduced circumstances are depicted with bare floorboards and a few key pieces of furniture. Dotted around the space are a TV, a sofa bed and a cabinet filled with chintzy china knick-knacks – all signifiers of the bourgeois lifestyle they've become obsessed with achieving.

Broadway World

@An uncomfortable and moving revival of Franz Xaver Kroetz's 1978 play"

by [Aliya Al-Hassan](#)

★★★★

On the night marking two years since theatres were forced to close their doors due to the pandemic, we are reminded of the power of theatre in **Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Tom Fool***. This poignant and disquieting play from 1978 neatly explores the crumbling of a family as social pressures thwart their ambitions and expectations.

We meet Otto Meier, a worker on the BMW assembly line who complains about his work to his ever-patient wife, Martha, and his unemployed son, Ludwig. Martha is tired and unengaged and Ludwig's sense of enforced isolation is growing. He steals money to escape to a concert, which leads to the family's lives imploding.

Xaver Kroetz is Germany's most frequently performed playwright; a left-leaning former Communist Party member and neat observer of the minutiae of life. The family is seen watching a royal wedding on television, Otto and Martha on a shopping trip and Otto proudly working on his model glider.

Through these mundane events, there is a sense of acute claustrophobia. Otto cannot concentrate on having sex with Martha as he is so distracted by having a pen taken from him by his boss and not returned. When they go for a meal, he cannot enjoy the memory, as he is mistakenly believes that he was overcharged.

Michael Shaeffer is excellent as he shows the acute, existential crisis developing in Otto, as he begins to see himself as just a cog in the large machine of capitalism. Shaeffer is both awkward and vulnerable as he shows Otto's rage ignited by a realisation that he is disposable, trapped in his life and suffocating.

Anna Francolini shows both slowly rising resentment and self-awareness as Martha and **Jonah Rzeskiewicz** is touchingly lost as Ludwig, but is a little underused. Xaver Kroetz shows forward thinking in his writing. Otto is very flawed and quite unlikable as a character. When he makes his trembling son strip to find the money he has taken, the action is abject in its cruelty and humiliation. However, we sympathise that much of Otto's behaviour is evidence of a mental breakdown. Xaver Kroetz creates Otto as a man damaged by the constraints of society, but his suffering is unsentimental. Otto experiences a real crisis in his masculinity; he feels crippled as the norms of himself as the breadwinner and family patriarch are challenged and subverted. The play addresses the issues at a time when women were breaking away from their role in the domestic space. Martha is both aware of and uncomfortable with this. The production is not comfortable to watch with its grim realism and emptiness, but it is not meant to be. These are lives without much hope or love and each character becomes increasingly alone and isolated. Estella Schmid and Anthony Vivis' translation is occasionally rather clunky and often does not flow well to the English-speaking ear. Diyan Zora's direction brings out some surprising moments of comedy in the script and also embraces the playwright's silences as well as words. It is the small gestures and seemingly banal movements that become imbued with meaning. When Otto smashes up the flat in a fit of rage, Otto and Martha slowly clean up the mess in a silence lasting over five minutes. It is both functional and moving. Zoë Hurwitz's design evokes the 1970s well, with brown and orange tones in the furniture and clothing. A period ceiling fan slowly and continually rotates, reminding the audience of the unrelenting bleakness and tedium within the play. Not everyone will appreciate the harsh sadness and banality of the production, but the nuanced and powerful performances on display are enough to leave a lasting impression.

Everything Theatre

"An acting masterclass that delivers a powerful and emotional display of human grievance and resentment."

[Sara West](#)

★★★★

Otto (**Michael Shaeffer**) is a semi-skilled worker at BMW, frustrated with the mundanity of his position and lack of authority in life. A pedant, he obsesses daily over minor issues such as lost pens, and restaurant charges, whilst meticulously building gliders and dreaming of becoming a world champion in his spare time. His wife, Martha (**Anna Francolini**), is frustrated at her son's lack of ambition. She berates him about his unemployment but won't allow him to learn a trade: she wants him to be a dental technician, or a banker; a job that she can boast to her friends about.

And so **Franz Kroetz's** play *Tom Fool* begins. Written in 1978, it is the final play from one of Germany's most successful playwrights. It portrays social realism in spades, picking apart a fractured family, all of whom are living with constant disappointment.

The set is intimate: the **Orange Tree** is famously one of a few London venues which is permanently configured in the round and as a result the 180 capacity audience are in touching distance of the action. On entering the space, the spectator barely registers a bed on stage, with what looks like a body under the cover. A body it is, and once the play begins Ludwig (**Jonah Rzeskiewicz**), the resistant son, is harshly removed by his mother, who then

remakes the bed as a sofa. Such is the set. Designer **Zoe Hurwitz** has carefully constructed the family's flat so we sit with them, aware of carefully chosen possessions, representative of their social status. Little touches like an empty plate on the dining table hosting left-over toast crusts, family photos and a lone plant on the living room sideboard reiterate their circumstances. Seats and gangways are cleared so that the actors can move on and off stage safely and Otto has to carefully slide sideways when negotiating his exit with his precious glider. There is no room to hide; but none of the performers need to.

This is a powerful and emotional display of human grievance and resentment. So much of the characters' true feelings are expressed in the unsaid, rather than words themselves; intensely suppressed, until the moment violence suddenly and shockingly erupts and the family flat is destroyed, piece by piece, before our eyes. The resulting menace hangs around for some time until Martha breaks the spell with wry humour, sparking a surprised burst of laughter from the audience. This is a device used throughout the piece, reminding us of the reality of everyday family life: like it or not, high drama is not sustainable and mostly we just need to carry on.

Lighting designer **Christopher Nairne** effectively picks out moments that need attention, occasionally focusing on the depressed inertia of a character – not easy in so small a space – before returning to the brightly lit drama of a family in clear view. As the piece draws to a close, familial relationships are redrawn and lessons learnt. But it is the abandoned and flawed patriarch Otto who remains paralysed and unenlightened, stuck in an eternal cycle of dysfunctional masculine insecurity. Capitalism put him here and he doesn't know how to get out.

The Orange Tree Theatre celebrates its 50th birthday this year. Long established as a centre for excellence, this production is no exception. The acting displayed by Francolini and Shaeffer in the lead roles is exemplary and the capacity audience last night responded accordingly.

London Living
"Incredibly moving"

★★★★★

In *Walden* Thoreau wrote "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Franz Xaver Kroetz, Germany's most staged playwright, is the voice of these people. In *Tom Fool (Mensch Meier)* he presents a working class family who are overwhelmed and stifled by their social limitations. He creates characters with lives and aspirations which are distorted by their circumstances and stunted by their compliance with a system that simply uses them. But despite the darkness of their plight, there is a lot of humour, great humanity and a genuine love for each other that shines through. This is a family that is broken, but it is a family that still cares and it is three people whom we come to care very much about. Kroetz may paint society in black and white but his people are wonderfully subtle shades of grey. Michael Shaeffer gives a bravura performance as Otto, who sadly tries to control what little he can in a life that is so controlled by forces beyond his ken. As his wife, Martha, Anna Francolini brings a wonderful depth to her role. She succeeds in expressing many complex emotions simply through an expression or a gesture. Kroetz is noted for his use of unspoken action to reflect the inarticulate world of his characters, and all three actors do a fine job of conveying their silenced, simmering inner selves. The silent acting out of the clean-up scene is simply riveting. The third cast member, Jonah Rzeskiewicz, does an equally fine job as

Ludwig, the son who uneasily carries the family's aspirations and who precipitates the confrontation which makes them question the accommodations they have made. Director, Diyan Zora, draws the best from all of her actors and gets the pacing of this incredibly moving piece just right. The play is a poignant series of snapshots into the lives of people oppressed and damaged, but who survive and who can learn.