

THE IDEA of four middle-aged, middle class, middle managers being shipwrecked inland on Rampsholme island in Derwentwater, might not at first seem the stuff of great comedy or high drama - but it is.

Workington Playgoers' latest production, *Neville's Island*, by young writer Tim Firth (who gave us BBC Television's *Preston Front* series), opened for its six performance run at the Theatre Royal on Wednesday.

The play hit the professional stage in Scarborough, in 1992 and has since won international acclaim. Those who saw one of its first amateur productions, were treated to some of the most thought-provoking theatre I have seen in a long time.

The play's four characters all work for the same firm and leave their urban existence in Salford for an outward bound trip to the Lake District. Unfortunately they do not follow the organisers' directions, get lost on Derwentwater, lose their boat when it strikes rocks and wash up on the shores of Rampsholme.

The team leader is Neville, a decent enough lad but overly pompous, who rapidly loses control. Then there is Angus who sets great store by material possessions but cannot hack his emotions, Roy, gentle and kind, if a little strange, who is into ornithology and religion and Gordon, a loud-mouthed bully whose cynicism hides a deep-seated desperation.

Tim Firth has a remarkable skill for producing sharply-observed and witty dialogue and there is an abundance of it throughout *Neville's Island*.

Nick Stanley as Neville was splendidly irritating, Brian Young excellent as Angus, growing in stature as the character realises there is more to life than a Mondeo, with Mike Savage giving a fine portrayal as the slightly dotty Roy.

But for my money, the acting laurels belonged to Morgan Sweeney in what, I understand, is his most important Playgoers role to date. As big, brash Gordon he was superb - if a little over loud in some passages because acoustically I missed some of Firth's wonderful dialogue.

But it was Len Wainwright's finely-wrought direction, offset by the stark simplicity of his set and good use of lighting and sound, which brought *Neville's Island* to all too frightening life.

IRIS WALTON