

Review of Pack of Lies by Lance Bassett

Banbury Cross Players' first production for 2015, and the second in their 70th Anniversary season, is Hugh Whitmore's cold war drama based on the true story of the infamous Portland Spy Case of the 1960s.

The play revolves around the Jackson family comprising Bob, Barbara and their daughter Julie. They live a quiet life in a pleasant suburb, their best friends across the road being the happily married Canadians Helen and Peter Kroger. The Jacksons' lives are shattered one day with the arrival of Stewart, an MI5 official informing them that their friends are suspected of spying for the Russians. He wishes to use their house for surveillance purposes and installs two young ladies who use Julie's bedroom to keep their eye on the comings and goings at the Kroger's house.

Whitmore's play provides an insight into life in the early 60's and the excellent split set designed by Peter Bloor was adorned with many period pieces and came over well as an ordinary comfortable suburban home in an ordinary town inhabited by ordinary people.

The overriding theme of the drama being this could happen to anyone anywhere, you never know who your friends and neighbours really are. Scary.

This was the opening night of the play run and nerves and a couple of prompts were evident. The theatre was only half full too. Shame. Kate Fricke who played Barbara seemed particularly nervous as the action began but by the second act was well into her stride and delivered a magnificent address seemingly word perfect and impressive as the situation tears her apart. She cannot believe the stories about her best friends and hates spying on them, having to tell a 'Pack of Lies' to the point that she almost alerts Helen Kroger of what is going on.

Kate's husband Bob (Andy Crump) came over well as the steadfast husband, dependable, rarely away from home and a rock for Kate who is greatly affected by being caught up in the earth-shattering revelation concerning her friends. His love for his wife is obvious throughout the play and even more evident at the end of the piece when he breaks down informing us of the fate of his wife.

Scarlett Primrose was excellent as the Jackson's daughter Julie. Her instant transformations from happy teenager to anti-parental rebel were a testimonial to the writing of Mr. Whitemore who obviously knows a thing or two about adolescents.

Banbury Cross stalwart Philip Fine played Stewart, the MI5 man, who at first asked then insisted, as the plot unravelled, that he use the Jackson home to spy on the Krogers. He played the part totally convincingly even to the point of the Oxbridge accent. (If he doesn't normally talk like that - well done, if he does - well cast).

Sarah Lonton portrayed Helen Kroger perfectly as the fun loving yet caring friend of the Jacksons who was up for anything except socialising on a Saturday night. (This was when the Krogers entertained a mysterious visitor, who of course turns out to be their contact with the Russians). Elegant and charming she was the epitome of the friend we all would like, but out of sight played a dangerous and dark game and eventually it was revealed she indeed was a Colonel in the KGB.

Peter Kroger was played by John McCormick and again he convinced us he was the happily married but slightly exasperated husband of Helen, and in a short spot-lit monologue revealed to us how and why he became a communist.

Kate Groves and Helen Watson were Thelma and Sally, the girls who spied across the road to the Krogers house from Julie's bedroom.

Directed by Terry Gallager, Pack of Lies is another Banbury Cross success story. The sets are getting better with more attention to detail, though it was a strange lighting effect to switch on a standard lamp, which didn't itself light up but the stage did. The pace of the play sagged a little at times and there were a couple of other strange monologues in the first act, but these of course are down to Mr Whitemore not BCP. Perhaps I missed their point.

In short another cracker pulled off by Banbury Cross Players