

## ***Home, I'm Darling - Review***

We were transported by BCP's latest production, both in time and space. The time was the 1950s, purportedly. And the space was The Mill @ Woodgreen, or more properly a suburban house in the bowling hall in Woodgreen Leisure Centre, The Mill's temporary home whilst its theatre space is undergoing renovations.

*Home, I'm Darling*, a 2018 play by Laura Wade, is billed as a comedy, and it is true that there are many funny moments. But it has an underlying seriousness, covering topics such as selfishness, reality vs. make-believe, feminism, sexual harassment, and people's identity. Some of the dialogue is quite acerbic and there are several points in the play quite uncomfortable for the audience, particularly Marcus' creepy advances towards Judy.

The play is quite unbalanced in terms of part size - ex-banker turned 1950s housewife Judy, played by Katy Roberts, is on stage for almost the whole play, whereas some characters such as Judy's mother Sylvia, played by Hilary Beaton, and Alex, Johnny's boss, played by Imogen Tredwell, have only a couple of scenes each. Katy Roberts is not a stranger to large roles, having played the lead in Agatha Christie's *Spider's Web*, and she portrayed Judy well as someone slightly out of touch with reality, who believes that if she buries her head in the 1950s sand, all problems (such as mortgage demands) will magically sort themselves.

Johnny, Judy's husband, played by Justin Clinch, who we most recently saw as ugly sister Bunion in his own adaptation of *Cinderella*, is torn between his present reality as an estate agent and a doted-upon 1950s breadwinner husband. Justin handled his character's relationship with Judy well, and there were some real sparks flying between them early in Act 2, as they finally confronted each other about whether their 1950s 'arrangement' was working. Hilary Beaton played Judy's mother Sylvia beautifully. Her character was understated yet

mesmerising, and her disapproval of her daughter's chosen lifestyle, going against all of her own ideals, was palpable, with a realistically distant relationship between them. Hilary's Act 2 monologue was particularly impressive.

Judy and Johnny's best friends, Fran and Marcus, played by Kate Groves and Matthew Perris, act as a foil to their 1950s chosen lifestyle. Though fond of that period (and particularly jive, which features centrally in the play), they are more grounded in reality, although even here there are questions about what Marcus is really like underneath his facade. Kate and Matthew portrayed Fran and Marcus' relationship very well, and Fran's slowly declaimed 'F\*\*k off' to Marcus at one point summed her feelings up nicely. Matthew, the only BCP newcomer in this production, was eminently disturbing as Marcus with his sexist views and behaviour. I hope that we will see Matthew in future BCP plays.

Finally, Johnny's estate agent boss Alex was played superbly by Imogen Tredwell. I have written in previous reviews (for *Things I Know to be True*) about her ability to portray such different characters across productions, and Alex was very believable in terms of her (purely platonic) relationship with Johnny and her later discussions with Judy. Two of the funniest points in the play for me involved Imogen's reactions, firstly to the 'vulva artwork' in a client's house, and secondly her reaction to Judy's suggestion that Alex and Johnny were having an affair.

The production was particularly challenging in various ways, and I think that director Lucy Byford and her team of cast and crew managed admirably with the unfamiliar and makeshift venue. The Mill and Woodgreen have done a good job of creating a pop-up theatre but given the huge room that the theatre was situated in, the acoustics were not good for everyone. I sat near the front and could hear most of the dialogue, but I spoke to those further back who found it hard to hear - particularly the female voices. I did notice from the outset that the sound was rather echoey, but in time I stopped

noticing that. Zac Lacey-Rousou did an excellent job of the sound, and the 1950s music blended with the contemporary mobile phone buzzing was slick.

Staging a production in the 1950s necessitates the accoutrements and paraphernalia of the time. Terry Andrews sourced a good range of 1950s props, but the main things for me were the costumes and the hair. Judy's cocktail dress was breathtaking and in general all her various outfits, high heeled shoes and hairstyles were amazing. The costumes throughout were good - I also noticed Alex's bright outfits in both acts. Well done to Suzi Caisey and Jane Shanahan, in charge of wardrobe.

Lucy Byford used set, music and scene changes creatively to give a faux 1950s feel. Using two of the actors (usually Kate and Matthew) to jive the scene changes under blue light was unusual and did not work for all audience I spoke to, but I thought it was effective, though it did perhaps lengthen a couple of the scene changes more than necessary. One thing I found perplexing was that the food and drink was mimed, and this was the first BCP production I have seen without real food and drink props. It was not until after play when discussing this with audience members that I realised that Judy and Johnny ate real pizza in Act 2 that it dawned on me that perhaps this miming was reflective of the make-believe of the 1950s. A clever idea, but it didn't work for me, as the miming just seemed odd at the time.

The play itself can be confusing for those unfamiliar with the script, bouncing as it does between now and then, pretence and reality, and then going back to three years earlier without any warning. Some audience members found this confusion diminished their enjoyment of the play, but this is perhaps more a comment on the script than the production - and besides, how bland it would be if everyone liked the same things!

One final comment: the disappearing wall. The set with its different rooms was designed and acted in well and it was clear to see where the hallway was and how to get from the living room (with its well-stocked bar) to the kitchen (complete with imagined 1950s fridge) via the hall. However, in a late scene I'm sure I saw Judy and Johnny walk across the front of the stage and have a discussion through a wall. It made me wonder whether the 'wall' was in fact only a pretend 1950s wall and not really there in the house at all. And this sums up the whole production - what, if anything, was real? Fingers crossed BCP are back to the reality of The Mill for their next production.

***Jo Genesis***