

National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

noda

Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Banbury Cross
Players
Production : Home. I'm Darling
Date : 12th July 2024
Venue : Wood
tre, Banbury

Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch for inviting me to report on Banbury Cross Players' production of "Home, I'm Darling". Justin himself was in the cast, but I was greeted by the Front of House Manager Liz Riley, and the Players' Chairman, Adrian McGlynn, was kind enough to find time for a chat during the interval.

The Players' schedule has been severely disrupted by ongoing building work at The Mill Arts Centre; the auditorium floor there was quite badly damaged by flooding during the winter. The Arts Centre has consequently installed a pop-up theatre in the local leisure centre, enabling the Players to bring this production into a new space. The raked seating is quite shallow so you don't want to be sat behind anyone too tall, and there is a bit of a sports hall acoustic despite the acres of sound-deadening blacks, but on the positive side the performance area is generously proportioned, and more than adequate for the downstairs of the 1950s house where the play is set.

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The opening gives little away. Housewife Judy, dressed in the first of a series of rather fabulous 1950s frocks, summons her husband Johnny to breakfast. She takes the top off his imaginary boiled egg. Their conversation is stilted and inconsequential, and the impression is of amateur actors in a second-rate drama. Was the rehearsal period long enough? But just as I was starting to fear that this could prove to be a long evening, Judy fishes out her laptop, and the realisation dawns that very little here is as it seems. Yes, these characters are acting out a drama, but it is one of their own making, and as the layers of artifice are stripped away we come to understand that this is actually a dissection of Judy and Johnny's relationship, and particularly the gender divide within their marriage.

The play is expertly written to raise lots of questions in the minds of the audience before it provides any clues to possible answers. Why are Judy and Johnny acting like this? Why has Judy, a graduate of the London School of Economics who had a well-paid job in finance, decided instead to stay at home and live out this curious fantasy? A lot depends on Judy's ability to maintain the plausibility of the choices she has made, and Katy Roberts did a brilliant job of bringing the character to life. For Judy, her 50s persona is always an act, and Katy was able to make subtle adjustments in portraying the extent of her confidence in the role, from easy acceptance to a determination, beyond reason, to go through with it. The flashback scene at the beginning of the second act afforded us the opportunity to see the "real" Judy, and we saw glimpses of this person in scenes with her mother Sylvia and friend Fran. Katy achieved this variation between her true character and the personality she chooses to project through subtle changes in the timing and cadence of her lines, and excellent body language. You could see her

tense up and withdraw into herself when she became defensive, and sense her mental anguish when she had to take a moment on her own – smoothing down her dress and drawing breath. Indeed, this sense of a woman on the edge was palpable more or less throughout, as Katy portrayed Judy with a sort of false serenity, detached from the real world, living out her fantasy in denial.

But “Home, I’m Darling” is much more than a star vehicle; in particular, Judy’s husband Johnny brings his own perspective to the couple’s relationship. Like Katy, Justin Clinch was able to bring tremendous variation to his characterisation of Johnny, from the stiffly formal 50s breadwinner to the happy, relaxed married man in the flashback. Like Katy, he achieved this both through the delivery of his lines, articulating his fantasy role with the guilelessness of an amateur actor but conversing naturally in other contexts, and through the expert use of body language, perched uncomfortably at the formica table for his breakfast egg but happily sharing his wife’s personal space on the sofa before their relationship changed in nature.

Arguably it’s Jonny who really drives the narrative, but he finds it difficult to present his argument against the couple’s 50s experiment. His discomfort and embarrassment, when idle gossip and some uneaten sandwiches lead to the admission of having “feelings” for another woman, was painful to watch. Justin made the suggestion plausible by projecting a very different personality when in the company of the woman in question, his boss Alex; they sat close together, and there was an intimacy to their shared laughter. Johnny starts to believe that Judy’s 50s obsession is the reason why he is being passed over for promotion, and his resentment starts to bubble up to the surface: “How can you be tired? You don’t do any-

thing all day!” . The spirit-crushing realisation that his wife has been deceiving him about the couple’s finances was also a powerful moment. It’s Johnny who realises that the fundamental issue that divides him and Judy is that when difficult situations arise, he doesn’t want to be lied to while Judy doesn’t want to be told the truth. It’s a realisation that nearly breaks them, but their love for each other, always evident in the ways that Justin and Katy interact on stage, finds a way forward.

An inner circle of friends and family provide further insight into Johnny and Judy’s marriage. Fran, played by Kate Groves, is Judy’s friend and confidante, and the conversations between Fran and Judy felt authentically relaxed. Fran’s natural rhythms and cadences in conversation provided an important contrast with Judy’s often brittle manner, and I liked her reaction and expression when she inadvertently broke a confidence. Fran is casually curious about Judy’s lifestyle preferences, interested in why you would make a positive choice to spend your days cooking and cleaning, but unable to see the attraction; her questions force Judy to confront her decisions, and some of her responses about the role of women both in marriage and in society are unexpectedly ambiguous.

Fran’s husband Marcus, played with disturbing plausibility by Matthew Perris, provided a reminder of the power imbalance in 1950s relationships. With a honeyed voice and an outgoing personality, Matthew portrayed Marcus as a decent bloke and entertaining company. However, warning bells sound when we learn that he has been suspended from work for inappropriate behaviour, an accusation he denies rather unconvincingly, and we start to notice how he treats Judy even in the presence of his wife – a glance here, a casual

arm there, and some deeply inappropriate chat-up lines. When Judy, desperate to earn the money to sustain her fantasy world, offers to “work” for Marcus, the bitterness he feels about the power women wield in the modern world (as he sees it) becomes apparent as he explores the boundaries of how far Judy might be prepared to go.

Judy’s mother Sylvia, played by Hilary Beaton, is a staunch feminist who doesn’t hide her disapproval of Judy’s lifestyle choices. A good listener but clear in her own views, she assumes that Judy is submitting to Johnny’s will, and that being a housewife lacks status as men never take on that role. It was only when Sylvia started to fill in some of the details of Judy’s upbringing, in a long, chastening speech notable for its confidence and conviction, that we really started to understand why Judy might have been drawn to the rigid structures of domestic life in the 1950s. Sylvia dismisses Judy’s lifestyle as a “Gingham Fantasy”, spat out with the repressed fury of someone who had lived through the cold, drab years of rationing, while suffering abuse at the hands of her husband. Hilary might have paused a little longer for some of Sylvia’s observations to properly sink in, but the tear, casually brushed away, was perfectly observed.

The cast was completed by Imogen Tredwell as Alex, Johnny’s boss at the estate agency, whose brusque, uncomplicated view of life presented a clear contrast to Judy’s doubts and indecision. Imogen was able to present Alex as the antithesis of Judy, dismissive of Judy’s anxieties when she pleads with her on Johnny’s behalf, and somehow offering a glimpse of an alternative future when Johnny is at his lowest ebb.

Director Lucy Byford was content to pose questions in an engaging way, and this was the most thought-provoking play I have seen in a while. Why did Judy cling so tenaciously to her 1950s fantasy even when her house and her marriage were on the line? Why was she quite so stubborn when it was clear even to her that the costs were far outweighing the benefits? Is a decision sexist only if a person is being asked to do something that they don't want to do? The buzz amongst the audience at the end of the show was a thoughtful discussion about what we had witnessed.

The performances were also technically accomplished: it was evident that the cast understood their roles and knew them inside-out, so that it was quite a surprise (if understandable in view of how much she had to learn) when Katy needed a single prompt. Lines were clear, with clever variation in tone and tempo to differentiate between what was real and what was essentially an act, and cues were hit crisply. I noticed that ellipses were so well rehearsed that lines ran seamlessly into each other, although I always feel that having prepared overlaps sounds more authentic, an approach that might have been particularly effective in the argument at the end of act one. The blocking was very natural and entirely in keeping with the prevailing mood; confrontations often took place across a piece of furniture, such as the kitchen table, or even in separate rooms, and the dancing (choreographed by Debby Andrews) was used as a loose metaphor for the state of Judy and Johnny's relationship. I also liked the mannered, choreographed scene changes which reinforced the idea that it was all for show, even if some of the incidental music sounded more 60s than 50s to me. But then, would

even Judy and Johnny have eliminated all anachronisms from their lives?

The set (designed by Richard Ashby) was certainly well matched to Judy's fantasy: the kitchen featured painted wooden fronts and an upright dresser in keeping with the design styles and colour palettes of the 1950s, but while the formica table provoked squeals of recognition from audience members nearby, I did feel that the kitchen chairs looked suspiciously modern. The drinks cabinet had the air of authenticity, and even I got quite excited when I spotted the soda siphons, the cruet set and the pottery chicken. Properties (supervised by Terry Andrews) reinforced the period setting; there was an old-style telephone in the hall, and the vintage crockery was almost too fine and decorative for the austere post-war years. It was a bit of a shame that the many instances of eating and drinking in the play were almost entirely mimed (I think I spotted a single slice of tired pizza towards the end), although I can understand that there were sound practical reasons for this choice. And to be fair, the cast, and particularly Justin, did a very good job of persuading us that the food and drink was really there – blowing on their hot tea and pretending to speak with their mouths full.

Judy's succession of frocks were the highlights of the costume plot (realised by Suzi Caisey and Jane Shanahan), essential to promote the fantasy element of Judy's chosen lifestyle, and a handy visual reference to the not dissimilar themes in "The Stepford Wives". But the costumes achieved more than this: Johnny's trousers were clearly of an appropriate material and cut, while Judy and Johnny's contemporary clothes (particularly Judy's jeans) were suitably different and everyday. Of the remaining characters, I particularly liked

estate agent Alex's trouser suits (identical in style but in contrasting colours – it's always good when supporting characters don't wear exactly the same clothes every time they appear); and I do hope she had a branded mini cooper parked outside! The 50s illusion was strengthened through hair and make-up: Johnny's moustache was exactly right (as well as rather suiting his character), while Judy's 50s wig had the practical benefit of allowing her to change hairstyle for the flashback scene.

With only a limited lighting rig in place, the lighting plot just about covered the performance area, although there were a handful of occasions when members of the cast were caught walking through shadows. However, the design efficiently enabled the audience's focus to switch between the kitchen and the living room, and there was enough variation to provide a very different ambience for the scene set in the middle of the night. There was a good quality sound system (Zac Lacey-Rousou) for the incidental music which I think also provided some support to the actors; I did feel that they were less audible when well upstage, which may have been caused by radio signal breakdown or inadequate microphone coverage of the set, but may just have been because the actors were further away from me

But these are minor observations. The most impressive thing was not that the show was presented at all, although that in itself was a significant achievement, but that the Banbury Cross Players gave us such a fascinating, thought-provoking production exploring gender politics within relationships: a constantly evolving study of Judy and Johnny's marriage and lifestyle choices, elevated by fine performances and intelligent direction. Chairman Adrian McGlynn claims in

his programme note that the Players “deliver the highest standards in our plays”, and on this evidence I can only agree with him.

Andrew Walter

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