<u>ODN Winter Festival Entry</u>

"The Girl on a Train"
Based on the bestselling novel by Paula Hawkins and Dreamworks film. Adapted by Rachel Wagstaff and Duncan Abel

Based on Paula Hawkins' bestselling psychological thriller, *The Girl on the Train*, adapted for the stage by Rachel Wagstaff and Duncan Abel, is a dark and unsettling exploration of obsession, memory, deception and the fragility of truth. At its centre is Rachel Watson, a troubled woman whose daily train journeys offer glimpses into the lives of strangers, until a disappearance draws her into a disturbing mystery. For an amateur company, the play presents considerable challenges, with its shifting locations, fragmented chronology and emotionally complex characters demanding inventive staging, precise direction and performances of considerable depth. Banbury Cross Players certainly rose to the challenge!

The evening began with a warm, friendly and professional welcome from the Front of House team, with plenty of people on hand to assist with programmes and guide the audience to their seats. Both halves opened with a small child narrating the traditional *Magpie* rhyme, an inspired touch which immediately established a vaguely sinister atmosphere, suggesting that we were in for something rather unsettling.

The set was cleverly conceived, with two door flats flanking the stage and four mobile flats upstage, which moved forward or rotated to establish the various locations. These were thoughtfully dressed, from Rachel's cluttered flat, complete with noticeboard and a wedding photograph suggesting her inability to let go of Tom, to the

more clinical surroundings of Kamal's consulting room and the homes of the other characters. Particularly effective was the transformation of the central flats into the underpass where the murder took place. With minimal furniture, including a leather chair and a versatile bench, the company created a succession of convincing environments without unnecessary clutter.

What impressed me most was the exceptional fluidity of the scene transitions – which is something I have particularly admired in many of Banbury Cross Player's productions. Rather than interrupting the action, the company remained actively involved, becoming commuters, moving through Rachel's drunken wanderings or contributing to the police investigation, while the scene changed around them. This ensured that the tension never dropped and the audience remained completely invested in the unfolding mystery. Flashbacks were equally well handled, with a simple shift from warm to cool lighting clearly signalling changes in time, while Rachel watched and reacted to events.

Lighting was atmospheric and purposeful throughout, while the sound effects were generally extremely well timed, particularly the intercom, playback of Rachel's drunken messages and the approaching train in the final scene. If I were to nitpick I would have liked a less abrupt sound effect for the arrival of Anna and the Detective by car, where a more gradual approach, followed by the engine stopping and a door closing, might have created a more convincing effect. The choice of music, however, was excellent throughout, I particularly liked the angry rock soundtrack accompanying Rachel's scenes particularly apt; Meredith Brooks' *Bitch* was a wonderfully appropriate choice!

Costumes were contemporary and largely well judged. Rachel's various combinations of casual clothing, together with her untidy ponytail, effectively reflected her chaotic existence, making her transformation into a more polished, professional-looking woman at the conclusion particularly satisfying. The Detective's traditional raincoat was another effective choice. I would perhaps have liked Anna's wardrobe to have been a little more polished, providing a stronger visual contrast with Rachel's dishevelled appearance.

The production was confidently directed by Lucy Byford, demonstrating a clear understanding of the text and excellent use of the performance space. The pacing was particularly impressive, with moments of heightened emotion and confrontation balanced beautifully against quieter, more reflective scenes. The movement of the ensemble, carefully choreographed transitions and seamless flashbacks all contributed to a production that felt remarkably slick and assured.

At the heart of the evening was a stellar performance from Sophie Raval as Rachel, who was rarely offstage. Maintaining a convincing level of intoxication throughout such a demanding role is no mean feat (one hopes the research wasn't too extensive!), but Sophie achieved this with remarkable consistency. She captured Rachel's confusion, obsessive behaviour, volatility, vulnerability and profound loneliness with tremendous sensitivity. Her journey was utterly compelling, and the contrast in her demeanour during the final scene, when we glimpsed the possibility of recovery and hope, was beautifully realised.

Lauren Davidson gave an enigmatic and deeply affecting performance as Megan, conveying a woman desperately searching for peace following the tragedies of her past. Her revelation to

Kamal about the loss of her baby was heartbreaking, delivered with such honesty and pathos that you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium.

Kate Groves convincingly portrayed Anna as a defensive, harassed mother driven to distraction by Rachel's constant intrusions into her marriage. There was perhaps an opportunity to push her cattiness towards Rachel a little further during the confrontation at Scott's house, but her frustration and anxiety were entirely believable.

I particularly enjoyed Richard Morris as Tom Watson, whose character underwent a chilling transformation. Initially appearing rather ordinary, even unremarkable, Tom gradually revealed himself as a calculating, manipulative and dangerous individual. Richard handled this journey superbly, culminating in a genuinely disturbing final confrontation. His ability to manipulate those around him, particularly Rachel, became increasingly apparent as the truth emerged.

Matthew Perris brought considerable energy and attack to Scott Hipwell, effectively conveying his bitterness, volatility and barely controlled anger, making him a credible suspect in Megan's disappearance. A little more light and shade might have heightened his unpredictability still further, but his vocal delivery was strong, and I particularly appreciated the softer, more vulnerable side revealed in his final scene with Rachel.

Prash Raval was thoroughly convincing as Kamal Abdic, initially presenting the calm, measured professionalism of a therapist. His questioning of Rachel was particularly well handled, and it was interesting to watch that professional composure gradually slip as his emotional involvement with Megan became apparent.

Simon Hook gave us a Detective Inspector who could have stepped straight out of a television crime drama! Enquiring, authoritative, pragmatic and refreshingly no-nonsense, he brought great credibility to the investigation and was a pleasure to watch.

Overall, this was an exceptionally accomplished and engrossing production. The cast were secure in their roles, the direction was assured, and the technical elements worked together to create a tense, atmospheric and thoroughly absorbing piece of theatre. There were numerous moments when the auditorium was completely silent, testament to the company's ability to hold its audience spellbound. Banbury Cross Players should be extremely proud of this ambitious, intelligent and beautifully executed production. A thoroughly gripping evening of theatre – congratulations to everyone involved!