National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	The Girl on the Train
Date	:	19th November 2026
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

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Show Report

I am grateful to David Smith for inviting me to report on the Banbury Cross Players' production of "The Girl on the Train". David couldn't be there as he sings with the Hawkstone Farmers' Choir, but Vice-Chairman Adrian McGlynn was in the foyer to greet me, and director Lucy Byford was generous with her time during the interval.

The play is based on the novel of the same name which was published in 2015, and the play was first performed in 2018. It's a complex, multi-layered psychological thriller – a detective story shot through with dark themes including alcoholism and domestic abuse. In the hands of the Banbury Cross Players, it is also an intense drama: the narrative is gripping from start to finish, the tension unrelenting, and the twists and turns of the plot invariably reveal fresh insights into the characters of the protagonists.

At the centre of it all is Rachel Watson, the titular girl on the train, an alcoholic divorcée commuting into London for work every day. Rachel is onstage throughout, and Sophie Raval was terrific as this lonely, vulnerable and often infuriating character. Sophie was equal to the practical challenges of playing the part: she had confident command of her lines, timed her cues in keeping with the emotion of the scene and her character's level of intoxication, and had impeccable control of her body language. Gestures were used sparingly as appropriate, and she was revealingly tactile with her ex-husband; Sophie also ensured that her

drunkenness was sufficiently underplayed so that it informed the narrative rather than becoming the story. She was brilliant at projecting her feelings, deploying a range of natural expressions to reflect her emotions from curiosity to petulance, from relief to regret, and when her eyes narrowed with incipient tears there can't have been a member of the audience who didn't sense her pain.

Sophie's greatest achievement, in my opinion, was in maintaining the intensity of her performance. There was a nervous energy about everything she did, so that there was a persistent, underlying sense that something terrible might happen at any moment. She must have been exhausted by the end of the evening! Rachel's loneliness fed into this – her dissolute, listless behaviour when alone at home captured this exactly, as did the physiological impacts of her excessive drinking as she begins to doubt her own recollection of events. In the course of the play, we learn more of Rachel's backstory – such as that her ex-husband lives nearby with his new wife, and that she split up with him at least in part because they were unable to start a family – and each new piece of the jigsaw fitted perfectly, demonstrating how well Rachel's character had been established and developed. Even little details such as changing costume onstage between scenes, and dancing along to the soundtrack, gave further insight into her thoughts and feelings. This was a complete performance.

Rachel's ex-husband, Tom Watson, was played by Richard Morris. At first, his characterisation of Tom was entirely and deliberately unremarkable: he lives with his new wife Anna, apparently dotes on their baby daughter, and you sense that deep down he still cares for Rachel. Richard is very adept at playing calm, considerate, family men: he has a mellifluous voice, an easy-going manner, and projects an air of quiet dependability. He's so good, in fact, that Tom's manipulation and betrayal of both Anna and Rachel creeps up on you, and it's a shock when you suddenly realise how he's trying to influence Rachel's memory of events. Richard's performance was the source of much of the play's power: little signs of his real character start to accumulate from quite early

on, but his apparently good nature becomes so embedded in the audience's consciousness that we are blinded to his true nature. Tom is, in fact, hiding in plain sight, and Richard's precisely calibrated performance kept him concealed there until the very end.

Tom's second wife, Anna, was played by Kate Groves. Kate was able to characterise Anna as defensive and uptight through her negative body language and quietly defiant expressions, and her lines were frequently delivered with an air of finality which didn't invite conversation. You could sense her hostility towards, and perhaps jealousy of Rachel as it is obvious to her that Tom still has feelings for his ex-wife. But there is something more, a sense that all is not well at home. Kate was able to project Anna's vulnerability and inner unhappiness very effectively, and she ramped up the tension incrementally as some of her deepest fears were revealed or realised in the closing scenes. Kate is particularly skilled at projecting her feelings when she is a silent observer of events, and I can clearly recall her horror and despair at the dramatic denouement.

One of Tom and Anna's neighbours, Megan Hipwell, has been babysitting for them, but now Megan has gone missing, and we learn in due course that she has been murdered. Lauren Davidson played Megan in a series of flashback scenes: Lauren's distinctively accented voice always brings character and depth to her lines, and here they were delivered with the urgency and quiet desperation of someone whose emotionally complicated life has been suddenly ended, and who has been given a final opportunity to tell her side of the story. There was often a quiet tranquillity about Lauren's portrayal of Megan: she is happy to let the words do the work, and Megan's recall of emotions and events is coloured by regret and self-justification. The almost ethereal quality of Lauren's characterisation was reinforced by her tendency to enter and exit scenes quite suddenly, in the manner of a fleeting memory conjured up from nowhere, but instantly banished by some real-life event. The anguish and despair embedded in her recounting of the death of her baby Libby

was deeply affecting, and you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium.

Megan's husband Scott was played by Matthew Perris, who characterised Megan's husband as confused and angry – reasonable enough if your wife is unexpectedly missing, and is subsequently found dead. Scott is understandably suspicious when Rachel turns up at his door, claiming to be a "friend" of Megan, as there are plenty of journalists out there looking for a story. But Scott also needs to talk, to try to understand what might have happened to his wife, and Rachel holds out the tantalising prospect that she might know something of vital importance. Matthew cleverly projected Scott's unstable temperament – open and courteous one moment, intimidating and dangerously out of control the next. And it literally was just a moment later: Matthew's ability to embody Scott's rapid changes in mood was a particular strength of his portrayal. He was also able to make good use of his impressive physical presence as he first tried to pressure Rachel into staying the night before pinning her in a stranglehold against the door; uncomfortable moments which resonated with recent news stories around abuse and consent. Scott is undoubtedly a complicated character, and Matthew was equal to the challenge in the complexity of his portrayal. Is Scott a victim or a suspect? Are his unacceptable behaviours a consequence of his grief-fuelled anger, or symptomatic of deeper issues?

It emerges that Megan had been seeing a therapist – Kamal Abdic, played by Prash Raval. Prash was able to portray Kamal as very poised and professional in his consulting room, analysing what clients had to say and adroitly deflecting any more personal questions. Unfortunately for him, Rachel is aware that his relationship with Megan wasn't just professional, as she had spotted them kissing as she passed by on the train. When confronted with this, Prash was able to indicate that Kamal was rattled as his rising sense of panic lengthened his pauses for reflection and analysis, and his responses became less certain and polished. Just how deeply was Kamal involved with Megan? Prash was able to ensure that Kamal retained his air of professional detachment, his educated aura backed up

by certificates proudly displayed on the wall behind him, but there was just a hint of guilt within the characterisation which left open the possibility that Kamal had something to hide.

Investigating Megan's disappearance and murder is D.I. Gaskill, played by Simon Hook. Gaskill, of course, is only involved in this psycho-drama in a professional capacity, and Simon portrayed him as appropriately detached from the events playing out around him. Clad in a classic detective's raincoat with the inevitable lanyard round his neck and notebook in his hand, Simon asked guileless questions of the drunken, devious and distraught characters drifting in and out of his investigations, leaving tiny but significant pauses before his more penetrating enquiries. He was able to bring out some his own character's backstory; his relatively sympathetic treatment of Rachel, for example, was no doubt influenced by his own father's alcoholism. There was more than a hint of social commentary in his trenchant observation that if your tipple of choice is in a paper bag then you're a potential menace, whereas if you cart around a Waitrose bag full of booze there's no problem at all.

The interludes between scenes featured highly stylised train journeys, generally played out well downstage to allow the stage crew time and space to shift scenery and properties. The contrast between the formal choreography of the train and the natural flow of the scenes was very effective; the packed train, with its rhythmic sway, and passengers clinging on to the overhead straps was particularly well realised.

The Banbury Cross Players are adept at staging pieces in a manner which works well in the distinctive performance space at The Mill, and "The Girl on the Train" was no exception. In Richard Ashby's set design, the acting area was backed by four trucks, each supporting a decorated and dressed flat for a key location. Rachel's home featured a pin board on which she displayed press cuttings about Megan's disappearance, highlighting Rachel's obsession with the case; the photographs on Tom and Anna's wall were ostentatiously focused on family; Kamal's consulting room was drily professional, and Scott's home featured a piece of

Megan's art as mysterious as the woman herself. The flats blended together well, but the relevant truck would be pushed forward (with the focus of the acting area adjusted appropriately) for different scenes. The few scenes in different locations, such as Gaskill interviewing Rachel at the local police station, were played out sufficiently downstage for the backing flats to become irrelevant. For me, the one moment of confusion was when two of the flats were rotated through ninety degrees to represent an underpass – I couldn't shake the impression that the scene of the crime was actually Kamal's consulting room.

The set dressing was detailed: I particularly liked the reproductions of local newspapers, the artwork, photographs and certificates on various walls, and of course the fact that there was liquid in most if not all of the bottles and decanters (although there clearly wasn't anything in the takeaway cups in the final scene). Shaun Parry's lighting design was appropriately zonal and atmospheric; there was some forward-facing, more overtly dramatic lighting to accompany the scene changes which added to the contrast in style between the main action and the interludes, and a few dynamic changes to support the narrative or highlight key moments. The catalogue of sound effects, musical clips and tension-heightening noise was seamless integrated into the narrative by Fraser MacLean.

The costumes were contemporary, and entirely in keeping with character; for example, Rachels' baggy sweatshirts and grey marl trousers exactly matched her lifestyle, and gave the lie to her story about commuting into work in London. A cap was all that was need to differentiate a principal character from a faceless member of the commuting crowd. Some of the actors had to transition quite quickly between roles, which probably explains why the Police Constable at the station had a tunic but lacked shirt and tie, a detail which probably caught the eye only because practically everything else was so precise and finely realised.

"The Girl on the Train" is a contemporary whodunnit in which the challenge of unravelling Megan's disappearance and murder is entangled in some troubling modern themes such as alcoholism, gaslighting and

domestic violence, not to mention ageless questions around trust and truth. Building and maintaining the tension inherent in the piece is critical to its success, and director Lucy Byford and her exceptional cast did a terrific job in keeping the audience on the edge of its seats while confronting them with some of the more unpalatable aspects of human nature. High production values and solid technique fed into a presentation in which the quality of the characterisation, and the associated development of character, was endlessly fascinating and engaging. This was Banbury Cross Players at the top of their game, and I look forward to the remainder of this year's varied and ambitious programme.

Andrew Walter
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20th November 2026