

Talking Heads

Alton Fringe Theatre

11-14 December 2013 Amery Hill Drama Studio

Alton Fringe Theatre chose its 25th anniversary year to perform six of Alan Bennett's superbly written monologues. What an inspired choice! Not only is it 25 years since the first performance on television, but also a fitting challenge for some of the best talent of the Fringe.

The six short plays capture the ordinariness and trivia of domestic life and are mostly set in the industrial north where Bennett was brought up. As the stories unfold we find not domestic bliss but cruelty, bigotry, sexual repression and tragedy. At times it made for uncomfortable viewing. The scenarios were sadly so easy to relate to, brought alive so cleverly. Thankfully there was much humour to balance the darker moments in a totally absorbing evening.

The monologue unlike a conventional play requires the actor to perform alone with few props or significant movements, with little set change and no other characters to interact with. The cast performed with confidence, sensitivity and great skill. Concentration was required for both actors and audience who were gripped and transfixed as they were drawn into the character's thoughts and feelings for an intense 45 minutes or so. There were moments of absolute stillness and quiet: it was enthralling. Without exception the actors really "got into the shoes" of their characters.

Tim Guilding as Graham in "A Chip in the Sugar" powerfully portrayed the claustrophobic relationship with his mother and the tension of being 'different' in society. Barbara Rayner, in an emotionally charged performance as Susan in "A Bed Among the Lentils", trapped in an unhappy marriage and a decline into alcoholism, found fleeting solace but ultimately no way out. Loneliness and loss in old age is a recurring theme and Chris Chappell as Doris in "A Cream Cracker" had us feeling for her fierce independence and forced cheerfulness. This strength of character was echoed so elegantly by Alison de Ledesma in "Soldiering On" leaving the audience so sad on her behalf. In striking contrast Lesley, played convincingly by Jo Foulkes in "Her Big Chance", took us to the Costa del Lee-on-Solent to eavesdrop on her rise and fall as a B grade actress. Finally we find both humour and hope in Jo Hopkins superb portrayal of Miss Ruddock in "A Lady of Letters", a lonely busybody who writes harassing letters until she finds company, sex and craft work – in prison.

These themes might sound rather heavy but in the excellent Amery Hill School Drama Studio – the home of the Fringe for many years - Bennett's ironic writing was brought to life by this talented group so ably supported by the team backstage and directed by Catherine Gerlach. One had the sense that each performance was strengthened by the tight knit support of the whole group. Risks and challenges were shared. The well- chosen costumes added to the characterisations and Steve Gerlach played his own compositions on the acoustic guitar with sensitivity allowing moments for reflection and change of mood.

This production was a sparkling way to mark the 25th Anniversary. So let's applaud our own Fringe Theatre for giving us such pleasure for the last 25 years and wish them continued success. We are lucky to have them.

John and Sue Hubbard