

# All the rage

**I**T was tricky for me to get to Guildford and I was beginning to wonder if it would be worth the effort. My destination was to be The Mill Studio for a production of *Look Back in Anger* and my heart sank further when my husband told me that the last production he had seen had been very dated. But I had promised I would go and I dutifully set out.

How glad I am that I did. This was a gripping, sometimes harrowing, often funny, production that had crossed the years with no obvious difficulties. True it is 55 years since the first performance of John Osborne's ground-breaking play, but the characters and their dilemmas and fraught relationships were right up-to-date.

The play is set in one room – a bedsit in the Midlands where three characters live. The set is both comforting and claustrophobic. There are newspapers (unfortunately current ones, but that is a minor criticism) littered around, and old stove, chairs and a bed, and in the midst of it, an ironing

board that seems to suck in all positive emotion. Surrounding the room are bars, symbolic of the prison in which the characters live.

These characters are Jimmy and Alison Prior and their friend Cliff who aspires to be the peacemaker. Jimmy rails against everything and everyone, in particular his wife whom he perceives as living without true feeling. "Oh heavens," he shrieks, "how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm. Just enthusiasm – that's all."

Jimmy and Alison come from far removed social spheres. He worked his way up by going to university (not red brick, "white tile") and now runs a sweet stall which is not his idea of intellectual fulfilment, and Alison comes from a privileged background. Jimmy hates her background, hates especially her mother whom he calls "Mummy" ("she's an old cow and she should be dead") and often seems to hate Alison. She, on the other hand, stands impassive, ironing everyone's clothes, the epitome of the downtrodden housewife who is despised by her husband. For her silence may be the only way she can cope/

Piers Wehner and

Katherine Senior are riveting in their roles as Jimmy and Alison respectively. Piers plays Jimmy as a tantrum prone brat. He wasn't a spoiled brat, oh no, for he is quick to point out the hardships that have engulfed him in his life, but he lacks the emotional maturity to grow up and perceive anything from anyone else's viewpoint. Katherine's Alison, on the other hand, tries too hard to understand and tolerate Jimmy and is in danger of losing herself in the maelstrom that is her husband. Katherine's pain and fear are palpable and her brokenness is heart-rending.

Jonathan Parish plays Cliff Lewis as an amiable and rather ineffectual character without the self-confidence he needs to stand up to Jimmy. Cliff's relationship with Jimmy is light relief but you wonder why he can stay in this claustrophobic atmosphere.

Into such an atmosphere comes Helena Charles, Alison's great friend. Jimmy hates her and her posh ways, and resents her influence on Alison. Lizzy Dive plays the role with a good mix of humour and steel. She is self-assured and can stand up to Jimmy, though steps



Lizzy Dive as Helena and Piers Wehner as Jimmy Prior

back from her threat to slap him (we were all thinking 'go on!'). She calls in reinforcements in the shape of Alison's father, Colonel Redfern, played here by Jack Hulland as a pleasant but rather sad character.

Alison departs, holding silently to the fact that she is pregnant, and at this point Jimmy and Helena's anger turns to passion.

To all intents and purposes, Helena and Jimmy are well matched. She puts up with his fiery rants with good humour (but still does his ironing) and there is clearly lust between them. But the atmosphere has changed. Cliff wants to leave, and it would be possible to imagine the lovers living on together for a few months longer before grow-

ing tired of each other. At least Helena could then return to her career – acting, but you sense that Jimmy would not last long without an audience.

Then his audience appears – Alison, pale and distraught, having suffered something that Jimmy once wished upon her, a miscarriage. In the first act he yells: "If you could have a child, and it would die...if only I could watch you face that." Remembering it now still makes me shudder. She returns and tells him and says that she wishes that he could have seen her then. She tells him she is "in the mud at last!"

Her pain does bring a reconciliation of sorts and they revert to the only way they apparently ever had of living

– pretending that they are a bear and a squirrel, hiding away from reality, ironic really as Jimmy longs for truth but cannot bear it.

*Look Back in Anger* is, of course, a brilliant and tightly written play, and this production did it justice. It drew us in and kept us there, however much it hurts. Amanda Knott, the director, Jason Addison, the technical stage manager and lighting designer, Richard Price, the sound designer and the actors who make up Creative Cow, the theatre company, are to be congratulated. For more on the tour and the company, visit [www.creativecow.co.uk](http://www.creativecow.co.uk). For the Mill Studio and the Yvonne Arnaud, Guildford, call 01483 440000 or visit [www.yvonne-arnaud.co.uk](http://www.yvonne-arnaud.co.uk)

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