

Blue Remembered Hills, by Dennis Potter

Alton Fringe Theatre, Amery Hill School Drama Studio, 1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> December 2011

Potter's play draws us into the seemingly innocent world of childhood play and then confronts us with two uncomfortable questions about human nature; are we inherently inclined towards acts of wrong doing or are our moral failings learned from adults? Secondly, at what stage of development do children know what the adult world considers to be 'right and wrong' and at what age should children be held responsible for their actions? We know these questions exist from high profile cases such as the murder of two year old Jamie Bulger in 1993 by two eleven year old boys Robert Thompson and Jon Venables. Potter, prefiguring the Bulger case by many years unsettles our collective golden memories of childhood and suggests there is a propensity in us towards cruelty even if that is masked by the innocence of childhood. What is clear from the play set in war-time Forest of Dean and the author's notes is that Potter is not drawing inspiration from research in child psychology, but from bitter personal experience. His absolute insistence that child actors should not be used in the play belies his recurrent fear of some of his childhood memories in the Forest of Dean and his request that there should be no "indulgent *ah!* of softened retrospection to interfere..." with the action of children at play. And in his moving final interview with Melvyn Bragg shortly before his death from cancer in June 1994 he reflects on the brashness of youth "We should always look back on our own past with a sort of tender contempt. As long as the tenderness is there; but please let some of the contempt be there." This is not a play about adults playing children playing adults this is a play about the human condition laid bare in childhood.

So, no easy option for the Alton Fringe Theatre! However, their willingness to take on challenging material has paid off spectacularly. The play makes many demands, adults playing children, recreating the forest, the dialect and accent of the Forest all of this to be done convincingly. The Fringe Company are more than just convincing, they are also consummate practitioners of the 'less is more' philosophy of theatre. With judicious use of props – the squeaky pram a perfect example, set and costume we are transported by our unfettered imagination to the Forest of Dean in 1943. We encounter seven children at play, their imaginations run wild in a world of wonder and fear. The immediacy of war is announced by the siren and the boys' ambitions to be part of the fight. Against this backdrop we laugh at the children's games of mummies and daddies, of boisterous one-upmanship and childish aping of adult behaviour. Yet running through the play and ending a moment of devastation we witness bullying, spite and utter abandonment.

The all female cast are superb. Their characterisation of seven year old children is clearly the product of skilful preparation by Mira Shapur allowing them to find their inner child. The opening finds 'Willie' and 'Peter', commandingly played by Lesley Willis and Barbara Rayner respectively, jostling for the position of who's best. They are joined by the stammering 'Raymond' and his defender 'John' played with sensitivity in the case of Raymond by Sarah Castle-Smith and a strong sense of boyish justice in the case of John by Penny Cushing. All four actors allow the 'children' to come to the fore as they chase and kill the squirrel and are united at first in triumph then sorrow as they reflect on what they've done. Later Peter and John will fight following more bullying of Raymond and egged on by the girls. The fight scene in silent slow motion interspersed with real time shouting from the other children is a masterstroke choreographed by fight director by Tim Guilding. The girls, Angela and

Audrey are a perfect pair. Pretty Angela beautifully played by Jo Foulkes and Catherine Gerlach utterly convincing as plain Audrey indulge in a game of 'mammy and daddy' with Donald or as the girls constantly and spitefully taunt him "Quack quack quack Donald Duck, Donald Duck". Donald, a memorable performance by Chris Chappell, pleads with the girls not to taunt him. It's an open secret that Donald is beaten and abused by his mother, that he is a pyromaniac and a thief. His absent father a POW in Japan, but Donald does not receive sympathy from the other children only derision and mockery. We see Donald alone in despair and crying for the return of his father, who would not want to reach out and help him? The girls are particularly vicious in their treatment of Donald, they know he can't play with the boys and they turn on him in an instant.

The children without Donald eventually meet up but are terrified when a siren is heard. Has someone escaped from the POW camp? The children conjure up the prospect of an escaped "Italian" with a big knife chasing them and slitting their throats. This causes the boys to try and assert who is the bravest in the face of such danger. Peter and John then terrify the others by pretending to be attacked. Audrey reacts with her customary bluntness and attacks Peter, she is a scary character. Meanwhile Donald in the barn plays maniacally with matches desperate to start a fire. The others once over their fright go to the barn to find Donald with the intention of frightening him with tales of the escaped "Wop". The children close the barn doors just as Donald sets his fire which quickly gets out of control. By the time the children open the barn doors it's too late for poor old Quack Quack, despite their calls for Donald to get out he is trapped by the flames, there is no escape. After the event, the children gather united in their grief, but as they mumble their words of sorrow they also begin to concoct their alibi "Twasn't our fault!"..."We was all together...Miles away"..."Poor old Quack Quack". The final scene provides the perfect combination of great writing and sharp yet sensitive directing, which was evident throughout the whole production. Director Alison de Ledesma places the cast at eye level with the audience; the dialogue moves the children seamlessly from 'victims' to conspirators and we feel part of their conspiracy. Donald who has suffered at the hands of his mother and the other children, we can feel his pain. Who is to blame? Is it a childish game gone wrong or is it the natural culmination of constant bullying? Once again Alton Fringe Theatre created a great piece of theatre, challenging, intelligent and excellent performances. Make sure you see their future productions.

Steve Gerlach