The Kitchen Sink by Tom Wells

Directed by Chris Lawson, at Oldham Coliseum
Reviewed by Simon Belt and February 2018

In the programme, **Chris Lawson** (Director) invites us to have a seat whilst he pops the kettle on for our evening in the home of one ordinary family. That was nice. In the first scene we have the cheeky grin of **Sam Glen** (playing the son Billy) asking his Mum, Kath (played by **Sue Devanney**), if Dolly Parton's nipples on the painting he's just done are ok. For a stage set, the kitchen was very inviting, perhaps because of its design and attention to detail with plumbed in radiator for extra warmth (Anna Reid), or maybe because of the believable and delightfully sweet exchange between Billy and Kath.

Having everything played out through scenes in kitchen gives a solid and stable basis for the

unfolding of the story, though as it unravels we see a family unit of rather random individuals struggling with their lot in life and in need of a break, or at least a hug. The introduction of the other two members of the family, rather than complement the warmth of Mum and son's opening conversation, is used to try and show the limited and limiting options for this working class family, and present them as rather atomised and somewhat broken individuals. Dad is Martin, a traditional self-employed milkman (played by **William Travis**), whose round is declining and unable to deal with repairs his milk float requires. The daughter is Ju-Jitsu focussed Sophie (played by
Emily Stott
), who is being pursued by family friend Pete (played by
David Judge
).

Martin also provides the hook-in to the title of the play, ***The Kitchen Sink***, as he's a plumber and he ends up repairing the kitchen sink. But the kitchen sink isn't just the title of the play, but playwrite Tom Wells' attempt to write a play about the life of the working class in 2011, or a representative family of it from the seaside on the East Coast. In a very self-conscious way, it aspires to capture the grit of dramas from the 50's and 60's, known as kitchen sink dramas, in their attempts to give voice to the actual lives of a working class coming out of rationing and asserting their independence from the establishment morality of a distant elite. It's a bold attempt, but a lot has changed since the era of kitchen sink dramas.

I suppose the two biggest changes since the era of the inspiring and powerful new dramas of the the kitchen sink grouping is that the working class, and its organisations representing them have been quite dramatically beaten and seemingly consigned to the History books. Throughout the 70's and 80's the aspirations for a bigger slice of the cake were systematically under assault and the organisations setup to represent ordinary people's interests were systematically pushed to one side and the empty shells they'd become cracked open, often with a policeman's batton. Most surprisingly though, it is the lack of confidence our rulers now have without the threat they perceived the working class represented, and their turn to the world of therapy to comfort them and get us to accept our lot. The kitchen sink dramas of the 50's and 60's expressed a boldness of ambition and that nothing should get in the way of realising it. This script has none of that, but plenty of the therapeutic condescension of today's elite.

Don't get me wrong, I thought the acting was excellent, Sue Devaney was absolutely brilliant and a delight to watch in action. I thought Sam Glen was so relaxed in his role, it was like he was a seasoned professional. The thing that was lacking was a credible script. It actually lacked any of the intimacy family life has, and though the humour was often very funny and well delivered, it was quite general and the sort of jokes you'd come up with at work or out with friends. There was one exception to this, and tellingly it came when the script did venture into intimacy, not the the family at the centre but through the decline and death of the boyfriend's gran. Albeit through today's therapeutic lenses of grief, the characters began to fill out, and though the granny as cannabis smoker (for health reasons of course) was a tad farcical, there was at least a proper attempt at opening up with some degree of intimacy. That it required an outsider to bring out intimacy in the family felt very odd. Alas, even this was tarnished by Pete realising that he couldn't become intimate with Emily because she had anger issues from someone making a pass at her a few years back, hence why she lamped her Ju-Jitsu examiner. This kitchen sink was more a vehicle for looking at the family through the tainted spectacles of our distrutful therapeutic culture and shoehorning issues its construct - a million miles from expressing the ambition of an aspirant class with a world to conquer.

This was a great night out with some tremendous acting on display in a lovely theatre with a terrific set, just let down by a clumsy attempt at reinventing a worthy genre. I'm rather surprised at the choice of script from Oldham Coliseum, but very impressed with they way they presented it on stage.