



[The Ladykillers](#) by Graham Lineham  
at The Lyceum Theatre, Oldham  
Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) November 2017

When I was given the opportunity to review Oldham Lyceum's production of *The Ladykillers* I didn't just say 'yes', but added, 'and if anyone else thinks they're going to come in my stead, I'll

kill 'em'! For as long as I can remember Peter Sellers has been my all-time favourite screen actor, with Sir Alec Guinness a close second. This truly iconic and fabulous 1955 film starred the latter, and saw Sellers perform one of his first on-screen cameos that wasn't a Goon character.

Yes, there was a terrible remake in the early 2000s - but we'll gloss over that as basically all remakes of the great films simply fall flat on their faces! This one probably fell flat though simply because it is a very British comedy, some might say quintessentially so; therefore moving the action to Mississippi and using Tom Hanks in the lead was doomed for failure straight away!

However, back to Oldham (sorry, London!). A little old lady lives alone in a terraced house by the railway line in a London suburb, and has a rather fanciful imagination. She invites the local Bobby in for tea whilst she tells him of her suspicions and flights of fancy. She has a room to let, and it is this room that is the ideal location for the gang of 5 criminals to use. They intend to rob the security van at King's Cross Station, and so the gang leader, the so-called 'Professor' Marcus arrives and convinces her to let the room to him and allow his string quartet to practice there. He poses as the conductor and the other four gang member string players.

I shan't write more of the plot since if you know it already it is pointless, and if you don't know it already then it would spoil your enjoyment!

The first thing which hits you about The Lyceum Theatre is its size - the auditorium barely seats

100, and the stage, as I have joked before, is the size of a postage stamp. How then could they possibly hope to stage this play which calls for a set to incorporate the interior of Mrs. Wilberforce's house to the tune of 4 rooms, one of which is an upstairs bedroom, a set of stairs, the door to an unseen bathroom, and to top it all (literally), the roof, as a couple of scenes are also played on there too! My first impression of the set was a good one. The spaces were clearly and cleverly defined leaving plenty of space for the acting, and everything looked authentic and period.

It was an ingenious design and well presented, and then I looked again, and saw that there were a few anomalies. For one, the cardboard painted cooker and kitchen unit looked very false and so obviously wrong in a set design of otherwise such care and authenticity (even down to cracks in the plaster!), and to leave the area at the top of the stairs leading to the bathroom just a black void was most unfortunate. Other areas which could certainly have been improved upon and would have made the design all the more authentic were the plain blue-painted flat outside the front door (very bland and unsure what it was supposed to represent, but it wasn't the house exterior), and the bedroom window needed something behind that to indicate exterior and place. However, despite all of this there was still much to like and admire with the set, and the train passing by was very cleverly executed.

The stage adaptation of this film sensibly changes certain things in order to make all the action occur within the bounds of this set. The plot doesn't really suffer from these changes in my opinion; in fact it makes the whole thing tighter; a little more compact and it would make it more threatening when Mrs Wilberforce realises her own culpability in the crime. The one thing that really irritated me though was the decision to have General Gordon (the parrot) covered, and suffering from some disease. That seemed forced and the comedy derived from it, false.

Directed by **Ian Orry**, the pace of the play this evening was generally too slow. Yes, it is a gentle comedy of a simpler time, but it did seem that the whole was going to grind to a halt

every so often. The pace and indeed urgency of the piece was really only at its best when all the gang were on stage. That being said however, there was some lovely character work and the sometimes wordy play still kept your interest and involvement through to the end. For me too, there was not enough comedy found in this piece. The play is much more comedic and farcical in its adaptation than the film was, and despite reading Orry's programme note wanting to make the play darker and more in keeping with the film, he lost so much by trying to do so (Think The 39 Steps farce stage play as against the film - an extreme example I know).

Also I found a lot of the directing very contrived and false sadly. Such things as Mrs. Wilberforce's first long speech in the bedroom talking about her 21st party with such nostalgia, but talking with her face only centimetres away from the unseen wall, and not acknowledging the men in the room at all was just one example. Combine this with very slow blackouts which were never completely black so we see dead bodies stand and walk off stage did ruin the whole experience somewhat for me unfortunately.

So, let me turn to the acting. All I can honestly say about this is, excellent! Not one weak link, and all wonderfully solid and hugely enjoyable performances. When faced with the daunting task of treading in the late greats' shoes, you simply cannot afford to try to simply do carbon copies of their performances - that simply would not be right. To take certain elements of their performances, and create your own around them, as they all did, was simply wonderful. I saw moments of Guinness in **Phil McCarthy**'s superb and obsequiously delightful performance of Prof. Marcus, and I also saw elements of Sellers in

**Coli**

**n Smith**

's spiv, Harry.

**Damien Kavanagh**

proved once and for all that Herbot Lom is not the only actor who can play evil with such comedic skill, as he portrayed with ease the Romanian killer who hates old ladies, Louis. The delightfully dumb One-Round was given a smashing make-over by

**Peter Dignan**

, and the upper-class closet queen Major Courtney was given a masterful performance by

**Paul Gledhill**

. I suppose Katie Johnson will always be for me the only Mrs. Wilberforce, but tonight she was alive in spirit, as

**Joan Duffin**

's interpretation of the role was equally good.

With good lighting and sound, and some excellent authentic looking costumes - I loved the policeman's uniform - then it proved to be a very solid and enjoyable evening's entertainment.