

The Ladykillers at Oldham Coliseum Theatre
Oldham Coliseum
by Graham Lineham
Reviewed by John Waterhouse
June 2016

Alongside a fashion to turn hit films into musicals (such as *Ghost*, *Elf* and *The Producers*), there have in recent years been a growing number of classic films that have been turned into plays, with an emphasis on farce; the most notable example being *The Thirty Nine Steps* and more recently, *Brief encounter*. When Graham Lineham decided to give this treatment to *The Ladykillers*, he was taking on not just a film with a very well-known plot but a movie famous for a stand-out performance by Alec Guinness (at the time of release in 1956, Britain's leading comedy film actor), backed by a host comedy greats including Peter Sellers, Herbert Lom and Frankie Howerd.

Graham Lineham, who is best known as the writer of *Father Ted*, wisely chose not to slavishly follow the film (in many ways a sophisticated dark comedy), adding a lot of farce and slapstick to the presentation whilst remaining true to the story and all the main characters. Some lines of dialogue have been retained but for the most part this is a completely new script. The result is an enjoyable romp which stands very much on its own merits whilst being a tribute to an Ealing comedy classic.

Whilst it was very clear who all the criminal gang are in relation to the film, every member of the cast brought a new identity to their role, with **Chris Hannon** as the evil Professor Marcus giving an excellent performance which reminded me very much of Peter Sellers roles in *Dr Stangelove* and *The Goons*, (right down to the wavy, black hair). **Henry Devas** who played Harry (Peter Sellers' role in the film) brings echoes of Delboy from *Only fools and horses* to his character, in nice contrast to the thuggish *One Round*, played by **Howard Gray**; a superbly stupid giant. This really is a gang of amusing misfits who other members are Major Courtney, played with eloquent reserve by **Christopher Wright** and Louis, an untrusting and dangerous Latino, played menacingly by **Matthew Ganley**.

The Ladykillers at Oldham has a split set that is reminiscent of some of the great Alan Ayckbourn farces such as *The things we do love* and *Bedroom farce*, creating an excellent image of 1950's Britain, with a backdrop of working train signals, which together with the visual and the sound effects, vividly bring to the life the idea that all the action is taking place next to a busy railway line. It was one of the best and most complex sets that I have seen at the Coliseum.

Overall, the play moves along at a fast pace right from the start and never slacks in pace. The classical music recital which the gang give to a group of old ladies has to be heard to be believed and considering that all the action takes place in an old lady's house, there is a lot of physicality in the production, at times leading to levels of violence that Quentin Tarantino would be proud of (albeit handled in a way makes this play suitable for all ages). There are also some nice, if perhaps over-repeated running gags which remind us that this is definitely an original play and not the film. I found the ending (without giving any spoilers) was very amusingly handled, true to the film whilst being in keeping with the air of the play.

I would definitely recommend *Ladykillers* as a really fun night out, which not only brings a freshness to a classic film but

conveys the period of Britain in the post-war period well, right down to the local, friendly bobby, Constable MacDonald, played with amusing warmth by **Simeon Truby** and polite and trusting old lady, Mrs Wilberforce, played convincingly by **Roberta Kerr**. A very funny show that should not be missed!

◆

◆The Ladykillers◆ is on at Oldhan Coliseum until 2nd of July and then moves to the Harrogate Theatre for one week.