

Home, I'm Darling by Laura Wade
at The Octagon, Bolton
Reviewed by John Waterhouse, September 2021



Bolton Octagon is back in full swing with 'Home, I'm Darling' being their second major show since the effective end of lock-down. Following on from the last production of 'Sherlock Holmes', a welcome trend seems to be emerging with plays being selected first and foremost for their entertainment value.

That is not to say that 'Home, I'm Darling' is not a thought provoking work and the play certainly takes a sideways look at some very topical issues. Above all, this play starts with a very original premise; what if Judy and Johnny, a modern day couple, decide, as far as is practically possible, to live a 1950's world? This means dressing 1950's, cooking 1950's, having a house full of 1950's furniture and décor and, perhaps more importantly as any of these, adopting a 1950's mind-set.

The attention to 1950's detail was quite exceptional, right down to the patterned lino floors and cereal tins and this was mirrored through with the costumes. So much so that the play appeared to be a period piece until the sudden appearance of a laptop. The reasons for this was that even the most hardened 50's aficionados need to use some modern conveniences like the internet to connect with other like-minded, hard-core retro fanatics. The real problems came from getting so much so much into a 50s mind - that it became difficulty coming to terms with the unavoidable modern world in which, for example women do often as not go to work and company bosses can be both female and black!

The set-up of the play provided both a great vehicle for comedy as well an interesting way of looking at the modern world. It also amply demonstrated how often people who desire to have lived in a previous era somehow block out the less pleasant aspects of those times. The 50's couple in this play lived in a well-heated house and were not subject to rationing. Another well observed factor was that the couple had become so dedicated in their commitment to 50's (or at least what they believed was the 50's) that they came in danger of forgetting who they both were as people.

With the various complications detailed above, there was the possibility for the play to have descended into farce but Laura Wade in writing this piece never lost sight of the seriousness behind both the unrealistic aspirations and the misconceptions of Judy and Johnny so that comedy and drama were maintained in more or less equal measure throughout. This was also no feminist rant because Marcus and Fran, another '50's' couple, had their own issues with Marcus lamenting that even to compliment a woman can now be viewed as a passive-aggressive means of control.

Director Liz Stevenson had wisely chosen to stage this play in the round so that the audience was taken right into this 1950's time capsule. The tight script was well delivered by all six actors with the pace never slacking. Sandy Foster as Judy was almost constantly on stage, as she grappled with maintaining a friendship with a 50s couple (played by Sam Jenkins-Shaw and Vicky Binns) and having a 50's husband (played by Tom Kanji) whilst being reminded by her mother Sylvia (played by Susan Twist) of what the 50's were really like and getting a strong taste from Alex, her husband's boss (played by Sophie Mercell) of how the modern world actually operates.

'Home, I'm Darling' is a witty and entertaining play which raises interesting questions about how life has changed over the last century whilst exploring the dangers of escapism and longing for the past