

Snake in the Grass

By Alan Ayckbourn

Illminster Entertainment Society

Friday 21st October 2016

The Play

Ayckbourn wrote this play as a female companion piece to his 1994 ghost play *Haunting Julia*. The former had a cast of three men, all haunted in different ways by the suicide of the daughter of one of them. Ayckbourn could see there was a trend, at the time, for successful small cast plays and he was also becoming interested in writing plays about contemporary issues. In *Snake in the Grass*, one of the characters is the implied victim of sexual abuse as a child and another, the victim of domestic violence. Unlike *Haunting Julia* there is much less clarity in this play as to which "ghosts" are real ghosts and which are merely in the sisters' minds and which others are staged hoaxes. Even so, the play is considered to be a much darker play than *Haunting Julia*. "Can't a ghost story reveal insights into human nature?" Alan Ayckbourn asked before this play's 2002 Scarborough premiere. Rather than a ghost story most commentators would say it is a suspense drama about murder, blackmail and haunting. The suspense is to do with whether the murders, blackmail and haunting are real and/or alleged and/or faked. This piece of work, which is essentially about inner demons also manages to induce laughter. For many this means it cannot really be described as a thriller because you are as likely, if not more likely, to be grinning with enjoyment than gripped with fear, more likely to be tantalised by Ayckbourn's insights into the female psyche than to be tingled with suspense. So the play is in fact closer to a classic Ayckbourn comedy than we might be expecting with its dark undercurrents. Ayckbourn justifies this by saying, "After all, most ghosts we encounter are not wailing nuns or headless monks. The phantoms lie within us, born out of a past that continues to haunt us; suppressed memories that grow into nightmares of our own imaginings as we lie awake in the darkness."

Many believe its strength lies in Ayckbourn's compassion for victimised womanhood. Several of his plays demonstrate Ayckbourn's unusual empathy with suffering women. Often his female characters need all their resilience to cope with bullying males. With deftness, Ayckbourn, the born dramatist, portrays the tension between the sisters as it progressively emerges against the background sound of sinister twangs from the tennis court's wire netting. Although he creates an atmosphere of simmering unease his understanding of abused women is so profound you wonder why he felt he had to fall back on the cheap frills of a ghostly thriller and several critics have commented on this. In the play I was particularly struck by an uncomfortable question he raises about whether abusive love is preferable to no love at all.

Presentation

The play is set outdoors as opposed to the indoor setting of *Haunting Julia*. This setting becomes the meeting place of the natural and the unnatural and maybe the supernatural. I felt that the production team had worked in harmony to create this meeting place successfully. The set itself required that we should see the front of an old summer house. This was created to great effect by Dave Goodall and with the help of Brian Perkins. They had built the veranda in front of the doors

that we assumed would have opened into the summerhouse itself. This was substantial and very solid with the trapdoor, which, instead of being hinged, lifted out, making it a bit more of a labour for the actors and on the night I was watching proving difficult to close fully. The double doors, hanging crookedly looked good along with the curtaining obscuring the interior. The wood had been weathered and aged very suitably. I was transfixed by the excellent stone wall that ran beside it and decided it might have been one of the commercial moulds you can get because of its seemingly solid nature. If it wasn't, I am even more impressed. The corner of the tennis court had been built complete with door and looked very convincing with again some ageing of the timber to suggest it had been there a long time. The decision to have the areas beyond this setting surrounded by black curtains I wholly approved of because it helped to isolate this "meeting place" of action from the rest of the world beyond.

The set was well dressed with pots containing plants which appeared to be dying, trailing ivy, wooden bench, bird bath etc. The only thing that jarred was the folding chair on the veranda which looked too pristine. I am never entirely sure, but I tend to credit the props team for acquiring these items as well as the working props. These working props were not extensive but all were in keeping. I thought the plastic glasses that looked like cut glass were a good idea. I loved that little folding table – what a find. I particularly liked the storm lanterns and failed to figure out how they were extinguished on cue – some trickery of Brian Perkins' lighting rig I presume. Full credit goes to Sarah and Harry Hunt for sourcing props and furniture.

The lighting plot gave Brian Perkins plenty of scope to show his mastery of lighting techniques. I very much liked the pre-set lighting with the single spot on the rocking chair which really set the atmosphere that is the background to the play. The lighting plot for a bright late afternoon in August was very good; no dark shadows, and faces all clearly lit. Then there was the gradual deepening gloom towards the end of Act 1 which was imperceptible to start with but then seemed to advance somewhat too quickly towards the end.

The darkness and varying moonlight in the Second Act, I thought, was spot on and I had no problem with characters sometimes lurking in the gloom with their facial expressions not well illuminated, though it did cause a discussion in the car on the way home. I thought it was essential to the general tension of the piece and avoided any sense of artificiality. My one quibble would be that although back up lanterns created a warm glow around the storm lantern on the summer house there was not a similar corresponding glow around the one on the table and this did mean that that area was darker than it need to have been. The timing of lighting cues was spot on apart from my feelings about the last few pages of Act 1.

The Effects plot is not very complex, as required in the script, but this had been augmented with some additional effects which I thought were great and gave Peter Schofield more of a challenge. I loved the children's ghostly laughter echoing from the past and the singing. Was it a child's rhyme or skipping song? It was so evocative and yet unobtrusive that afterwards I couldn't fully recall what I had heard. The bird song was also at just the right level to set the atmosphere without intruding. The inclusion of Beth Wilson's music, which echoed the wind chimes was also really good. The taped male voice was, to me, a bit too loud and therefore did not seem as though it was coming from the other end of the tennis court. There was the sinister scream of some night creature – a fox maybe –

after Miriam told Annabel there was nothing to be frightened of in the tennis court which was really blood chilling.

The costumes provided by the cast were effective and well chosen to reflect the personalities of the characters. Annabel's and Alice's bags were good in contrast to each other. I liked the fact that Annabel's clothes changed and Miriam's only by slight variation. Alice's clothes were suitably casual and suggested a more working class background. Annabel's, were smart and spoke of a woman who had been efficient and influential. Miriam's attire was suitably frumpy and I loved her somewhat oversized mac. Her silver party dress was good.

Chris Williamson had plenty to keep him busy in the stage management department; the shaking of the wire on the frame around the tennis court, the rocking of the rocking chair, and movement of the wind chimes to say nothing of the throwing of tennis balls. I wondered whether they could have had even more effect if they had been hit by a racket with considerable force.

Production

Lyn Lockyer is both an experienced and award winning director. This play was well cast and that was the first element that was going to ensure a successful production. The ladies were older than the two sisters they were playing but we were able to suspend belief and Miriam's character appeared to have aged more, which was, I think, in keeping with the fact that she had been left with the burden of father to deal with. What was in sharp contrast was the child-like impishness of this portrayal that was so effective and ensured that the humour that is inherent in her character's behaviour and manner was rung out of the lines to the full. Characterisations were generally good with Annabel suitably domineering and off hand at the start and Miriam mousy, neurotic and insecure. Alice was cold and calculating. Part of the dynamic between the two sisters is, of course, the fact that they reverse roles during the course of the play and the balance of power between the two shifts. Miriam's impishness turns dangerous and it is soon apparent that her childlike innocence has withered in the bud. The exchanges between all three characters had the comical brittleness that was required. Personally I would have liked to have seen the transformation of Annabel to be as starkly contrasted as that of Miriam. Annabel was not quite as brittle as I wanted her to be, with the nurse and her sister, at the start of the play, to be a good contrast to her frailty and vulnerability towards the end, which convinced me more. I think more could have been made of her laugh to highlight her somewhat inappropriate sense of humour. Also she seemed agitated rather than brisk and in control as she was constantly fidgeting with her hands in what I assumed to be signalled anxiety. It seems reasonable that she was anxious but I think she would have been covering it.

By its nature, in this play, there are scenes which are fairly static but good use of levels helped to add interest and all moves were purposeful rather than done to add variety. At the start of the play I was impressed by what I assumed was good cue biting but it later became apparent that at least one of the actresses was coming in too soon with lines, however this settled and became better in the second half. This is a three hander with a huge number of lines to be learnt, especially by those playing the two sisters and despite what I have just said the play appeared to be well rehearsed and the performances secure. There was good pace and variation of pace throughout the play with particularly good use of pauses. I think moments of tension were achieved and the sinister aspects of the action well pointed. Even on reading I think that the plot turn involving Miriam and Alice acting together is predictable from about a third of the way through the play and I think, therefore,

that it was a good idea to signal the oncoming change of allegiance at the end of Act 1 Scene 1 with the way that Miriam was directed to say, "Yes, we're sure to think of something."

You had changed monetary values to fit in with the value of property today but I was not sure why the proposed location for the move was changed from Fulham to Nelson. I thought it a pity that it was not really clear that Annabel saw Alice emerging from the trap door and this caused her collapse, as in the stage directions. Also if she had slid down the fence, as described in the script, ending propped against it rather than prone I think that might have been more effective. Though, the suggestion in the script, that her eyes should open at the end of the play just seems bizarre to me and it was definitely a good idea to ignore it. The nature of the relationship between Miriam and Alice I do not remember being signalled as intimate in the way the script seems to suggest. It certainly gives you a jolt when you read it, introducing yet another conundrum right at the end of the play when there are already so many questions about the nature of the haunting going on that it was, I think, as well to skate over it.

One of the things that is a mark of great direction is evidence that the director has a clear vision for the production and a good sense of the meaning of the play. Since the meaning of this play is somewhat enigmatic, I think that Lyn has not simply followed the script but boldly gone with her own interpretation. Although I might have approached some things differently I respect her vision and the consistency with which she applied it to the decisions she made.

Acting

Jo Neagle as Annabel Chester

I have made comments about your characterisation in the above section about production. It is not always clear how much of what you see in a person's performance is about the way they act and how much about the way they have been directed. Your portrayal of Annabel made her a softer, more endearing person than I believe is the way in which she is usually played. It was subtle and there was a lot about it that I liked but it did not allow, in my view, for as complete a transformation to happen by the end of the play. I have to say that the whole section of dialogue when you described the marital abuse was very compelling and powerful. I also felt that your struggling with Annabel's heart condition was very believable.

Maddie Lowe as Alice Moody

You maintained a good northern accent or is that your own? I liked your defensive stance with your arms often crossed across your chest. This was either directed or your own idea but it certainly worked. Your smirking facial expressions were good and really helped to convey the disdain with which you were treating the daughters of your ex-employer. Your diction and well timed delivery of lines also helped to really give impact to the threats that Alice was issuing. Unfortunately there is a comparatively brief appearance at the end of the play when the duplicity of Alice and Miriam is revealed, for the audience to adjust to what their relationship has really been and why they were in partnership. As mentioned above, the script suggests more than an unlikely friendship but certainly adds to the complexity of the plot, giving little time for the audience to assimilate the implications. You did manage to completely alter your interaction with Miriam to suggest a relationship of equals.

Felicity Forrester as Miriam Chester

In my opinion this is a gem of a part and one that you really threw yourself into. You displayed a convincing air of vulnerability in the first act and so the shock of your last line had full impact signalling that *you* might be the snake in the grass. Your portrayal was helped by the fawn skirt, brown flat shoes, mis-buttoned long cardi and straight "Alice" banded hair but it was your use of body posture, including open legged seating and nervous shaking, and expressive use of eyes, which were twinkling and mischievous, which really told your characters' story in the first part of the play. Your lovely clear voice and well timed delivery of lines made the very most of both the humorous and chilling nature of what you said. This was a performance that was full of energy and impact. Your monologue about the night daddy punished you for going to the village disco was spell-binding. I think this was a very believable portrayal of a very damaged, completely amoral, psychopath.

I have acted in and directed Ayckbourn plays but this one was new to me. I find it intriguing and it has left me with more questions than answers. It, in many ways, does not fit into any one genre except perhaps black comedy. I can see why it has its critics but equally I can see why you wanted to do it. I think it represents a challenge and that you all rose to it. Thank you for a thought provoking and entertaining evening.

If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution or got any details wrong please let me know.

lynne.wooldridge@btinternet.com