

WOMAN IN MIND

BY ALAN AYCKBOURN

IES WAREHOUSE THEATRE ILMINSTER 28/10/15.

THE PLAY

'Woman in Mind' is Ayckbourn's 32nd play, written in 1985 and premiered, typically, at Scarborough. It continues the theme of a woman's breakdown un-noticed by unsympathetic males first seen in 'Just Between Ourselves'. However the difference in this piece is that the audience see Susan's breakdown exclusively from Susan's point of view. It is a challenging play, as it asks the audience to engage with a character who is unpredictable and whose perceptions become increasingly unreliable. The drama swings to and fro between Susan's real and fantasy family, the latter seeming to be the antithesis of her own reality. However as Susan's mind unravels, the two worlds collide and roles interchange in a surrealistic nightmare.

PRESENTATION

This is a highly challenging play to present. The transition from the real to the fantasy garden is not helped by vague stage directions from the script, but which gives an imaginative director many opportunities. The stage at the Warehouse was comparatively empty, allowing the parallel scenes to take place without clutter. The set was bordered by a stylised garden hedge/ perimeter, and the centre alcove opened into a more abstract image of a landscape. There is a clear choice here when it comes to representing the changes of venue; it can be done through the acting, or a combination of lighting, sound and set changes. The challenge is that

it happens almost spontaneously during the scene. The change here was signalled through a subtle lighting change which illuminated a larger area of the stage with a warmer hue during the fantasy scenes. It certainly worked quite well from an audience's point of view, but I think there could have been a little more attention perhaps to other agents of change; lighting, music? It was all a little too austere. The costumes were excellent- I liked the contrast between the drab colours of the real world, and the crisp whiteness of the fantasy scenes. Particularly good was the exotic costumes for the final scenes, especially the bishop!

DIRECTION

There were enormous challenges to the direction of this play. The opening section was well handled, reflecting the confusion of Susan and the anxiousness of Bill Windsor; you had a good balance between the comic and surreal aspects of this encounter. However, when the fantasy scene came into play very shortly afterwards, I was hoping for more of a contrast in the pace and style of these sequences. The pacing of this scene was rather too frantic; the costumes of Andy, Tony and Susan were beautifully stylised white, and they were drinking champagne; however I would have expected to see an appropriate shift in acting style, perhaps more languid and expansive?

I think you dealt with the later scenes of confusion very well. You made the apparent incoherence just about coherent; and you were not afraid to bring out the wry humour out of the tragic chaos. The wedding/ racing scenes were finely handled, and you built the cast to a highly theatrical climax.

I am going to commit heresy here, by saying that some of Ayckbourn's duologues are rather long and repetitive; however the conversations between Susan and Bill in Act 2 , were paced well .

Finally, I think you did a very good job of co-ordinating the many strands of this complex play into a coherent whole.

ACTING

Susan- Jo Neagle

What a hugely demanding role this is! Not only have you to portray a woman in the process of a breakdown, you have to respond to the very different circumstances in which you find yourself. You did this well- I liked, firstly the confusion early on, then your world weariness and witty delivery of lines to your awful real family. When the change occurred, you adapted your response accordingly, after a natural hiatus to being a languid and pampered wife. If I have a slight quibble, I would suggest that the contrast between the two worlds could have been emphasised a little more by differing acting styles.

Finally, I thought your duologue with Bill Windsor really brought out the subtlety of their relationship, and also I really enjoyed your uninhibited final moments into oblivion!

A delightful performance.

Bill- Michael Paine

I think as an actor, you were well aware of how typical an Ayckbourn character Bill was. Right from the start, you played him full-bloodedly, as a bumbling well intended GP, who doesn't appear to be totally in control. Your comic timing throughout was excellent; yet you played the character with greater depth, transcending the comic

elements. I particularly liked your 'confession' to Susan; this was moving and well nuanced. We saw another facet of your acting skills when you were patronizing an invisible Lucy, which led on to the delightful rabbit sequence, which you handled beautifully.

Throughout you demonstrated utter commitment to the role, and clear understanding of the genre. An excellent performance.

Andy- Dave Goodall

With your white suit and languid manner you exuded the very antithesis of Susan's real husband. There was a lot of detail in your physical attention to Susan's every need. A small point.. perhaps you could have slowed down the pace of your characterisation early on to provide a contrast to Susan's real husband? I did like the way that, as the play progressed, you became increasingly patronizing and over attentive to Susan, your character progressing incrementally from caring to creepy! The character swapping in Act 2 was challenging, but you made it work well.

You acted Andy with great subtlety- a very good performance.

Lucy- Anna Griffiths

From the moment you came on stage it was clear that you understood not only your own role, but the genre the 'fantasy' family were inhabiting. Yours was a very well paced and slightly stylised performance; a too good to be true doting daughter, naive and optimistic, but easily upset; I enjoyed the bubblyness when you announced your intentions to marry, and also your devastation when Susan refuses lunch, and the cheerleading during Susan's argument with Gerald. Particularly good were your reactions during the conversation between Rick and Susan; clear and very poignant.

A very intelligent and sensitive portrayal; well done!

Tony-Matt Hughes

You played a very well realised fantasy younger brother to Susan. You took a very robust take on patronizing her, and as the play progressed, your character's attitude hardened towards Susan's dysfunctional real family. You brought out also the sinister/black humour of the character during the 'drop dead' sequence, and followed the surrealistic tone of the rest of the play through your acting. Your violent changes of role towards the end of the play were very full blooded!

A very good performance.

Gerald-David Pugh

Gerald is a very obnoxious character- we see that right at the beginning of the play, and you brought that across very well. I really liked your offhand treatment of Susan, early on in the play, and your complete obliviousness to Susan's needs. Gerald is quite a typical Ayckbourn dysfunctional male, and you were certainly aware of that in your acting! You were very offhand with your wife, yet slightly creepily supportive of your sister Muriel. I liked the way you obsessed about the 'book', and the outrage of its burning. You Also shared Muriel's sense of grievance-not a nice man, but played very well!

Muriel- Paula Denning

The whole of your body language and acting style contributed to what could have been a rather two dimensional character, but you made Muriel your own. I did like your long-suffering martyrdom, and the sly asides you made. Your shuffling movements and line delivery emphasised the resentment, and possibly jealousy you felt towards Susan. A very well realised character, acted well.

Ricky- Dave Prior

The audience get to know quite a lot about Ricky before his entrance, and the impression is given that he is a little strange. When you presented yourself at the beginning of Act 2 you came across as being refreshingly normal! You still harboured some resentment to your mother, though and that was well expressed and actually justified. There was also a tinge of adolescent behaviour manifest, thus making your rendition of Ricky well-rounded and convincing.

Summary

I thought you made a very good job of a very difficult play. You made sure the audience were fully aware of what was happening, I enjoyed the evening, and was made to feel very welcome.

Thank you very much.

Dave walsham

