

# DANGEROUS OBSESSION

by N J Crisp

Ilminster Entertainments Society – Friday 27th October 2017

## THE PLAY

I've not come across this revenge thriller before, but I can see its attraction for amateur groups; just three in the cast, set in real time, the action being continuous across the interval, and in one relatively simple location. It is carefully structured to wind up the tension; the first act ends on a 'gasp' and the second act builds nicely towards an unexpected denouement and a satisfying conclusion. There's just one major problem with the plot, it seems to me... Mark must have known who John was, right from the start, and must surely be very anxious about this unexpected visit and the strong possibility that his guilty secret will be revealed – and yet there is no suggestion of it in the script, presumably because the author didn't want to give the game away too early. I shall be interested to see how your director deals with this!

## THE PRODUCTION

### Presentation

What an impressive set! I really liked your interpretation of the Driscoll's conservatory, slightly angled across the whole width of the stage, with glazed french windows up into the rest of the house, stage R, and just enough light behind them to be able to imagine a drawing room beyond. The floor appeared to be very smart lino but I would guess was painted, there was an array of nicely curtained windows (or at least frames) all around the dwarf wall, whose apparent depth was convincing, and there was a practical half-glazed door with an effective roller blind.

I entirely approved of the decision not to light the upstage area beyond the conservatory and to paint everything behind it black; so much better, in my opinion, than to try and create a realistic view out onto a lawn and flowerbeds, which would have been awfully difficult on an amateur theatre budget. Inevitably however my eyes told me that it was already dark outside, and I was quite prepared to accept this until one of the characters mentioned that it was "mid-summer, early evening". In a play where the convention is 'theatrical realism', I think I would have changed the line rather than set up a conflict in the audience's mind. It could just as easily have been 7pm on an early October evening, though admittedly it would have to have been a particularly warm one for Sally to be still pottering around in a swimsuit!

The conservatory was well furnished with pot plants, cane furniture, occasional table, and the inevitable drinks trolley... People in plays always seem to knock it back at an amazing rate, (presumably to justify getting up and moving around so often), but they very rarely show any evidence of its effect. I was amused incidentally to see that neither Sally nor Mark added more than a splash of tonic or soda – presumably so as to avoid having to nip out to the loo halfway through!

It was good to have no less than three practical lights around the room and switching them on and off was perfectly timed. Lighting when the curtains around the conservatory were open was well planned and coverage was excellent. I liked the fact that John was lit in the spill at the beginning and the end. However, I found it rather patchy and a bit too green when the overhead floods were on. I was still in "dark outside" mode I suppose, but I felt the lighting contributed to my confusion. I think it would have been better to keep the wall lights on all the time, except when John switched them off to discourage the Driscoll's guests. Incidentally the effect of the half-light at this stage was beautifully done.

Sound was particularly well executed I thought – the arrival of Mark's car and the doorbell tinkling were only just discernible, and therefore extremely realistic. And I would think that the voice of the female would-be guest was recorded too – nicely placed anyway, as was the music from the stereo earlier. Footsteps outside the curtained windows would also have been a nice touch; an opportunity for crunchy gravel maybe? We wouldn't have heard John's presumably, because of the music. One effect which was called for in the script was birdsong – I didn't hear any, and nor did I expect to, because it appeared to be full-dark outside. However John's line

about birds twittering had been left in, and again this jarred. Was it carelessness I wondered, or maybe a reluctance to cut anything of what the author had written? Actually, on reflection, I don't think it was the latter because I'm pretty sure you cut John's line "There's a hole in your curtains" early in Act 2.

Props were all fine – the drinks all looked real, with only the slightest froth on the whisky. There was an ice container, and though Sally commented about her G&T having become too dilute, I didn't actually see anyone put ice in the glasses. Did they? The phone looked to be of a suitable period, but I bet you wished you'd hung it on two screws, not just one... Stella dealt with the malfunction with aplomb and Dave wisely ignored it. I'm so glad it didn't put him off his stride. Someone had gone to the trouble of printing off what could well have been hotel bills etc, and I was delighted that the starting pistol blanks all fired reliably. The shattering of the sugarglass tumbler was extremely well done – Mick's timing was spot-on and the effect was terrific! Obviously you'd decided against John's firing at one of the windows with his second shot, not too surprisingly since we would have seen it broken at the end when John opens the curtains again, and I thought firing at the wall behind Mark was a better option. My only slight cavil was the lack of a bullet hole at the start of Act 2 – not too difficult to apply in the interval! Costume was pretty straightforward – dark suits for John and Mark and that pretty silk-look shirt over Sally's blue swimsuit. Well worthwhile changing from flip-flops into sandals too, I thought – I don't think this was scripted.

All in all, I thought the presentation was of a high standard, and contributed a great deal to our enjoyment of the production.

### Direction

The production was a terrific success – you must have been delighted, Celia, with the audience's response! In part, of course, this was because I think we appreciated the quality of the acting, but there was no doubt that you drew us in and held our attention very effectively, by building the tension with great skill. The direction was never showy, but always well thought out, and the whole thing flowed beautifully. In my experience it isn't easy to do this with just three actors, and especially in quite a wordy play. The temptation is to move them around a lot, to change the stage picture, and I was so pleased to see that you resisted this. Each character clearly had their 'own' chair and stuck to it, getting up occasionally to get another drink, or to make a point, and this always looked natural and well-motivated; not a single "director's move" – well done!

So – no criticisms? Well, you'd be disappointed, surely, with unalloyed praise, so I have a few...

I think, to be honest, that the production was a little rushed at the start. I sensed that we were just about to applaud the set when Sally entered, and so we refrained, and then within what seemed like very few moments we saw John, and he was clearly trying to attract her attention. I suppose I had expected him to watch for a while, as scripted. It would certainly have been creepier, and there was a great opportunity to have him suddenly 'there' if Dave had slipped into position behind Sally while she was watering, revealed (with an audience gasp I would think) when she moved on. It seemed to me that you had decided to play down the slightly sinister opening, perhaps for fear of giving the game away too early, but within 3-4 pages he is locking the conservatory door and pocketing the key (very deftly done, and rewarded with a shocked buzz from the auditorium) so we were in no doubt that he was up to no good! The pace of their opening exchange rattled along, and I thought this was appropriate initially in that it indicated that both characters were nervous, but the automaticity of the responses, particularly from Sally, began to bother me and I longed for some variation in the speed of delivery, to inject more naturalistic patterns. If the decision to pace it up was taken in order to make those opening 10 pages seem less wordy, then this was a perfectly reasonable directorial decision, but I think it needed more shaping – and not just with those socially awkward pauses that were in the script. The arrival of Mark however changed the pace down a gear and from then on it seemed a great deal more natural and comfortable.

I watched Mark carefully when he came in, to see if a decision had been taken about his response to John's being there – a guilty start perhaps, a double take even, and then furious thinking while distractedly going through the usual rituals with his wife... something at least, to make us realise that these two men have some history and that Mark is anxious to be rid of him. This would have left a small question mark in our minds and

might have meant that we didn't feel too cheated when the truth was revealed later. I didn't see anything. Mark was indeed making it clear that he wanted John to drink up and go, but this came over as a perfectly reasonable response under the circumstances. And the author's failure to provide this small clue in his script was not, for me anyway, a good enough reason for the director to collude with the deception!

The rest of the 1st Act developed beautifully – I sensed that we were hanging on every word, and the gasp of shock all round when John pulled the gun out of the briefcase must have been very satisfying. And then of course we got the demonstration that it was no replica – a wonderfully effective piece of theatre! I was trying to remember back to when Mark last changed his glass at the drinks trolley, and presumed that he didn't put whisky into it this time? I've no experience of sugarglass except in bottle form, but I'd guess that it melts quite quickly when exposed to liquids. And presumably it shatters when gripped extremely firmly? Very cleverly done, anyway, and a great moment to send us all out into the foyer, chattering excitedly... Bravo.

The pace, and more particularly the energy, was well picked up when the action continued after the interval and was sustained throughout that quite lengthy exposition from John, with good tension around the arrival and departure of the Lady Visitor – I think we were all holding our collective breath! And the threatened rape of Sally was quite uncomfortable – nicely done, especially since it evoked what appeared to be self-pity rather than outrage from Mark. I suspect we all felt that this was the final nail in the coffin of this despicable man, and so his apparently being shot to death behind the sofa maybe didn't seem quite so unacceptable... Actually there are times when I wish I hadn't read scripts in advance, and this was definitely one of them! At any rate, I began to realise that John was attracting some sympathy from Friday night's audience by this stage, and that his unexpectedly warm and genuinely solicitous phone call to Jane's bedside phone not only provided the penultimate twist but also showed him not so much as creepy but rather honourable. I thought this was a very satisfying interpretation and that his exit, after Mark's failed attempt to shoot him, had just a touch of justifiable triumph about it. The final tableau was very telling. Excellent work!

### Acting

You had assembled a super cast, and I think their apparent ages worked OK, though here too a bit of editing of the script would have helped I reckon. Jane's being pregnant was a significant plotline and needed to be left in of course, but this wasn't a problem since we could easily assume she was significantly younger than John, but I don't think you needed to keep the references to Sally's wanting a baby, which would have been quite a stretch (apologies, Stella!).

I was amazed to read that Dave had taken over the role of John just three weeks before; hats off to him for learning the lines in such a short time – no mean feat, considering the importance of the role - and hats off to the other two in the cast for making this work so well. There were a few prompts on the Friday night that I came, but they were taken very smoothly and weren't too noticeable.

### Sally Driscoll – Stella Davies

Sally is of course the person to whom we, as an audience, can and must relate because, after all, the story is happening to her. I thought her initial irritable reaction to John's intrusion was very believable, and then – being British – she overcompensates. Very good indication of feeling uncomfortable in the swimsuit with him in close proximity, and finding an excuse to put the shirt on over it, and I believed her when she told Mark later that she didn't find John boring at all. It did bother me however that the opening scene was so over-paced – I really wanted to see Sally processing answers before replying, because that batting of lines to and fro had more the flavour of a speed run than a genuine conversation. I'm sure you'd been asked to make sure cue-bite was nice and crisp, but a character's response can begin non-verbally before they start speaking, so that energy is sustained, and a certain amount of hesitancy and searching for the right word adds greatly to credibility, as long as it isn't overdone. Once Mark arrived the production settled into a much more appropriate rhythm for the rest of Act 1, and I really enjoyed the subtlety of their interaction as a married couple – mutually supportive but gently bickering none-the-less.

In Act 2 Sally carries much of the responsibility for responding to John – Mark having deflated under the threat of the revolver. I thought you sustained this very well, and particularly in relation to Mark’s admission about the affair. The unsaid words when rape is threatened and Mark begs her – “Sally...please...” was such a powerful moment of betrayal – I’m sure we all felt for her. And isn’t it interesting how pregnant a silence can be – like the silence at the end when Sally looks at Mark. Superbly done!

### John Barrett – Dave Goodall

I reckon it is the mark of a natural actor, Dave, that they can make it seem as though a role was written specifically for them, and you slipped into this one with apparent ease, even though it was at relatively short notice. I don’t suppose it *was* easy – a tremendous line load of course, and only three weeks in which to develop and polish this character. What impressed me most is that you managed somehow to make John unexpectedly likeable, and even admirable, by the time we got to the end. Yes, he was rather full of himself, and yet able to hide this behind a very forgettable persona; he was precise to the point of being pedantic and though perfectly aware that much of what he said was misleading, he took great care to be scrupulously truthful, and honest – even to the extent of leaving some money for his phone call. Clearly he had planned every detail of this revenge and by gosh it worked marvellously well! I had read him as being decidedly creepy, as I suspect the author intended, and I really liked the fact that you played against this – without any attempt to ingratiate himself with the audience. The turning point for me was those few moments when he spoke tenderly to Jane on the phone; there was genuine warmth in his voice, and I saw him in a new light. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who gave a little silent cheer as he left the Driscolls’ comfortable life together irreconcilably shattered, and I could almost imagine him giving himself a tiny triumphant fist-pump. Excellent work.

### Mark Driscoll – Mick Glynn

I think the decision to put some colour in your hair, Mick, was a good one. It made you look at least 10 years younger! You dressed well and the youthful energy which you brought on stage with you was impressive – we were left in no doubt that here was a successful, confident businessman, whose wealth insulated him from all life’s struggles. The contrast between himself and the self-deprecating John could hardly have been greater! And what a long way Mark had to fall...

I’ve already mentioned that some indication that the two men had some sort of uncomfortable history would have been more honest from the audience’s point of view, and would have helped sustain your performance throughout the rest of the first act; in the absence of this you had simply to become increasingly bored and frustrated with John’s apparent inability to take the hint and go. This worked perfectly well, though I think a bit more awareness of the watch on his wrist would have underlined it. Once the gun comes out and John makes it quite clear that he can, and will, use it, then Mark *must* have realised that this is all to do with his affair with Jane and her subsequent death in the car accident. He goes a bit quiet, his confidence ebbs despite what he hopes is a watertight alibi, and it is Sally who makes all the running in refuting John’s assertions. I thought you did this ‘deflation’ very well, and I was pleased to see him apparently sweating – the frequent mopping his face and neck with his handkerchief was a nice touch. And then we get the dreadful, shameful, response to John’s insistence that he wants “an eye for an eye” and Mark reaches rock bottom in our eyes, pleading for his life in exchange for Sally’s virtue – and we still haven’t had the revelation that he was driving the car when the accident occurred and that he ran off leaving Jane for dead. Just a thought about the way you told this appalling story; rather effectively you acted it out from a seated position, but it was clear that Jane was on his right in his visualisation, judging from the gestures you used with your right hand. But of course she had been in the passenger seat on his left, before he pulled her out and put in the driving seat.

It seemed inevitable that Mark would have to try and shoot John at the end, and immensely satisfying that his tormentor had foreseen this too! I thought this performance was outstanding, Mick. It must have been quite a challenge to play a man who is progressively and thoroughly destroyed in front of his wife, but you rose to it magnificently. Bravo.

### SUMMARY

Between you – director, actors, production team – you made a really good job of this play and gave us an excellent evening’s entertainment. I think a bit more editing of the script could easily have removed the

inconsistencies which ensued when you decided to make the garden dark, but that this decision had a knock-on effect in relation to the lighting in the conservatory, which needed rethinking. The production was very ably directed by Celia Crookes, and though it seemed to me rather over-paced at the start, once it settled I thought the tension was ratcheted up extremely well, and considering it was quite a wordy play the evening flew by. The acting was of an excellent standard, as we have come to expect of IES, and the characterisations were very credibly portrayed.

I sensed, from the joyful line-up at the end, and the audience's uninhibited approbation, that you knew you'd done it well!

I am so glad to have been able to watch this thriller, and I shall remember it with admiration. It has been a great pleasure to adjudicate. Thank you so much for inviting me. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

Philip de Glanville  
18.9.17