

Paul Stammers review of Ladies' Day by the Bartholomew Players

“There’s more cash in here than we earn in a month. It’s a Robin Hood thing, isn’t it? Get in.”

It sounds like a line from a heist movie, rather than a heart-warming blend of music, banter and Blair-era nostalgia. But there are plenty of twists and turns in this tale of four ordinary women from a fish packing firm who have an extraordinary experience at the races.

The Players have chosen well, both in terms of selecting a production in which women take centre stage and assembling a sassy, confident line-up – three of the leading ladies being newcomers to the drama group.

Navreet Dey is remarkably versatile as lonesome single mum Jan, belching as she drowns her sorrows with champagne. Becca Howard steals several scenes as the gobby, but ultimately vulnerable, self-appointed leader of the group, Shelley. Liberty Foreman makes a great acting debut as the smiling, bashful Tony Christie fan Linda, who discovers unexpected romance. Lesley Robinson offsets the hi-jinks as their departing colleague Pearl, who has been harbouring a long-concealed secret with the elusive Barry (Steve Ashcroft, returning yet again from Sweden to join the cast in this production, directed by Deborah Lisburne Diacon). The female cast includes Pip Burns (the play’s stage manager), who also takes to the stage as a TV camera operator.

The menfolk may play second fiddle, but their characters are larger than life too. Ianto Wain cuts a sad figure in both of his roles, as down-at-heel jockey Patrick and drink-sodden gambling addict Kevin. Gareth Hammond gets to chew the scenery as spivvy ticket tout Fred in contrast to his role as slightly prim manager Joe at the fish factory. It’s lucky for Nick Smith’s character that the #MeToo movement wasn’t around in the hot summer of 2005 – his snide, lecherous TV racing pundit is a guilty treat nonetheless.

The set is ably transformed from a fish-filleting factory, complete with health and safety posters, to the racecourse setting, even if the scenery changes are a little slow.

Ladies Down Under is the sequel to this upbeat comedy – will the Players perform it in due course? I hope so.