

Paul Stammers review

Nazis and sitcom-style humour don't normally go together – although there was an ill-fated attempt in 1990 called *Heil Honey I'm Home!*, which was axed after the pilot episode. But writers Marks and Gran use a light-hearted approach here to highlight awkward truths about history, identity and family loyalties.

While the play features a ghostly visit by the man who signed a pact with the Soviet Union and effectively enabled the start of the Second World War, it's not so much about wine merchant-turned-social climber Joachim von Ribbentrop (portrayed by a sombre Nick Smith) as how people yearn for a sense of belonging. No more so than Jewish convert Ruth (Elaine Leggett, who skilfully conveys a range of emotions from flippancy to indignation and sorrow), eager to prove her credentials at the Passover meal that is the centrepiece of this tragicomedy. Her ongoing spat with her spiteful mother-in-law (an imperious Deborah Lisburne-Diacon, decked out with a Margaret Thatcher hairdo and abrasiveness to match) is a joy.

Delightful though the histrionics and spiky jibes are, it's welcome that John Casey (a professional actor who joins the Players for this, the world amateur premiere of the production, no less) presents the pragmatic central character Gerald convincingly as a conflicted figure on the brink of fracturing his marriage and alienating his brother David (another strong portrayal by Ianto Wain). Having discovered the watch's grim secret via advice from a watch repairer (Ed Miller), his initial elation at the prospect of earning a fortune soon disappears. Sara Miller lightens the tone as level-headed daughter Sasha, the most stable and life-affirming member of the troubled family.

A few hesitant moments aside, the cast seem in confident form, perhaps especially buoyant after the Covid-imposed lull of the past 18 months. There is a remarkably physical clash at one point that made me flinch. Indeed, director Gareth Hammond says that was one of the most memorable scenes in the production he saw staged at the Oxford Playhouse in 2010. So intrigued was he that he managed not only to get permission from Marks and Gran to put on this performance, produced by Denise Santilli, but they attended a rehearsal to offer advice.

Overall *Von Ribbentrop's Watch* is somewhat contrived (despite being based on a true encounter), and perhaps it's for the best that a truly soap opera type revelation is ultimately abandoned after being hinted at, but this is a great evening's entertainment.