

Daily Info Review by Heather Kay: 15th May 2024

Packs a Powerful Punch – in the Solar Plexus

This is a powerful and utterly engrossing piece of theatre. A compelling mystery/spy thriller storyline draws the audience into a moving 360° examination of the moral and emotional dilemmas involved when truth and honesty can no longer be taken for granted.

Pack of Lies started life in 1971 as the BBC Play of the Month *An Act of Betrayal*. Its author, Hugh Whitmore, specialised in bringing to life real historic characters and events. My earliest memory of his writing is the sinister dark candle-lit atmosphere in the “*Horrible Conspiracies*” episode of BBC’s *Elizabeth R* (also in 1971), which illustrated how the late Tudor monarch was troubled by plots and spies and ciphers. Moving on over four centuries later, *Pack of Lies* tells the true story of another set of spies, in early 1960s Cold War days, with this difference: the focus is not on their wider political significance, but their impact on their humble, ordinary neighbours across the road.

Bartholomew Players have been fortunate indeed in having their Patron, Laurence Marks, volunteer as Director for this production (with Debi Lisburne Diacon). A BAFTA Award-winner who has worked with stars of stage and screen like Dame Judi Dench, he has elicited some stunning performances from the amateur cast. Chris Carson (father Bob), Elaine Leggett (mother Barbara) and Seren Lemaire (fresh young 1960s schoolgirl) are utterly credible as the family whose world is rocked when their front bedroom is commandeered for surveillance on their neighbours. These actors inhabit their characters, coming across as completely natural in every look, every gesture, every intonation. They establish a grounded, unforced sense of likeable normality at the beginning of the play, which allows us to travel with them through their harrowing journey.

It is the mother who bears the brunt of the experience. She has trusted and loved her best friend, the brash, generous, charismatic, supposedly Canadian Helen (played with great aplomb by Claire Crowther). As the play progresses, Barbara’s doubts and creeping suspicions concerning her closest friend are raised, rejected, reinforced. She does not know what or whom to believe. Who is telling the truth, who is lying, what is still true, what has been a lie? While the mysterious surveillance proceeds, she is forced to hide her feelings while intelligence is still being gathered. But this in itself is a form of deception: she has been manoeuvred into living a lie herself. Her reality has been shaken, her sense of right and wrong is confused, and she is torn between which to hate more, the person who may have deceived her and lived the lie or the person who exposed the lie she wanted to deny. The intelligence gathering is likened to water in a kettle: it is bubbling but we must wait for it to boil – an apt metaphor for the stress building up inside Barbara, her grief borne as such an anguishing weight in her stomach it makes her physically sick. Elaine Leggett portrayed the gradual unravelling of Barbara’s former buoyant self and the slow crescendo to heartbreak so convincingly, she took the audience with her every step of the way.

This was a brilliant choice of play. Not only was it utterly engaging during the superb performance, in terms of the story and the characters; the way it revolved around the

impact that lies, deceptions and loss of trust can have on individuals and on society, throwing a spotlight on different perspectives, left one pondering on these questions long afterward. What could be a more important topic to reflect on at this point, in a world of online disinformation, deep fake AI, and politicians economical with the truth?

There are still tickets left for tonight (Wednesday), when Laurence Marks himself ("Birds of a Feather", "The New Statesman") will be in the audience; I'm interested to see how they react!