

Writtle Cards' Billy Liar

Billy Liar – 29, June 2006

Director – Peter MacManus

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins

Unlike some other 1960s classic comedies, such as the plays of Joe Orton, Keith Waterhouse's Billy Liar did not appear to make jokes at society's expense but relies on the simple comedic plot of a daydreaming lad and the scrapes he gets himself into. In essence Billy Liar is a situation comedy. Were it not for the 1960s dress (although I know many Yorkshiremen who still dress this way) and the obvious visual clues on set (eg the old wireless on the sideboard) this could probably have been set in a more modern era with little directorial interference. But perhaps the complexities of modern life in 2006, complete with SkyTV and the internet, inhibit a modern audience from empathising with the overactive imagination of a teenage boy. For somehow this production didn't seem to gel and I don't believe it was the performance but rather the play itself.

The characterisation was generally strong throughout and the decision to stick with Yorkshire accents worked most of the time. Billy was good, as was Florence, while Geoffrey Fisher was just superb. Billy's dad may have come from Bradford for all I know but his rapid fire, accent perfect moaning at Billy was spot on. The contrast with his slower-paced, put upon wife, Alice, worked well and the trio of parents and mother-in-law, legs akimbo with surgical stockings and knickers on view, was always a treat. Billy was played by an actor who had the right age and temperament and he coped well with a demanding role. I particularly liked his attempt to persuade Barbara to give up the ring by actually telling the truth, or a close version of it! But I was not wholly convinced by the daydreaming. Perhaps a different lighting plot and more obvious accompanying music could have emphasized the few dream sequences, however short.

Rita and Liz, two of Billy's girlfriend, were excellent and while one was a strident harridan the other was a gentle contrast, made more obvious perhaps by being played by the same actress. Barbara and Arthur made a strong contribution to the play and the staging was good. A lot of effort must have gone into the set, which managed to show a front room, a hall way, stairs and the outside garden in one static set on a small stage. Good use was made of the auditorium as an entrance and exit from outside the house and the director was not afraid of the dramatic pause; it seemed like several minutes after Florence shuffled on stage before the action began but this only heightened the sense of theatre when Florence actually began talking to herself. This is only my view but perhaps a few more dramatic devices were needed to draw out Billy's full character. This may have detracted from the gritty realism but it may have enriched our enjoyment of the play, which was like a snack rather than a full meal – I enjoyed what I saw but would have liked a bit more.