

Venue

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ReviewThe Darkroom

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Alma Tavern, Bristol (Tue 4-Sat 15 Oct)

THEATRE You're never in for a dull moment with Steve Lambert. The Bristol playwright is one of our most consistently original voices, and if the plays don't always hit the spot in terms of clarity and characterization (but sometimes, oh boy, they do), Lambert's scenarios – from an exploration of changing Sixties attitudes to homosexuality to an unflinching look at the mechanics of sado-masochistic relationships – always cast fresh and detailed light on little-known worlds.

Steve's latest work is no different. The first in this year's autumn new-writing season by the ever-excellent Theatre West, it takes place in 1949, in a remote cottage somewhere in the English countryside. Here the bright, hungry working-class girl Faye (Charlotte Ellis) and the nervy, introverted genius James (Gerard Cooke) have retreated to try and live a blameless rural idyll, and to put behind them the traumas and moral uncertainties of the recent War.

James worked (and excelled) as a code-breaker at Bletchley Park during the war. There was, though, one momentary lapse of concentration, whose grave consequences continue to haunt him, giving him a permanently hunted demeanour. Faye, meanwhile, is a bright, determined woman, whose past gives her both twinges of regret (changes of loyalty, both sexual and political) and memories of happier, more stimulating times.

This ill-assorted but quite touching couple are living a slightly fractured peace in their remote cottage until the arrival of William (Duncan Bonner), a man who has featured prominently in both their pasts. William has ultimatums and offers for both of them, and how they will respond to these shapes the rest of the play – and the rest of their lives. To reveal more would be to spoil your enjoyment – suffice it to say that William holds power over both of them, be it sexually, professionally or financially. What follows is a curious (and sometimes hard to follow) dance of power between the three of them, with secrets hinted at and revealed and, finally a dramatic change in the dynamics between the three.

Like all of Lambert's plays, 'The Darkroom' is strong on atmosphere. There's a strong sense of both the slightly pinched, wholesome good humour of the postwar years and the turbulent swirl of ideologies – socialism, communism, Nazism – of the previous two decades, and just how much those ideologies inflamed and indeed defined people. Typically for Lambert, there are also some sexual secrets and traumas to be revealed and explored too. All of which makes for a fairly gripping tale, very strong on the flavour of its time. The complex interplay of relationships is, though, hard to follow at times – the union of James and Faye is not wholly convincing, although it's clear that both have demons from the past that they feel they can better fight together. Similarly, the drip-feed of revelations and the motivations behind the characters' behaviour is confusing at times, although at others – James and Faye developing, for the very first time, shadowy old photos showing things that he doesn't wish her to see, and which, splendidly, we do not see – it is simply very dramatic. Credit, too, too Pamela Benham's simple, eloquent direction and Ruth Stringer's pitch-perfect set design.

All three performers excel here. Charlotte Ellis's Faye is intelligent, empathetic but spiky when riled, trying hard to nurture James but also wistful for her dynamic, culture-soaked London past. Ellis's expressive, mobile face can convey tenderness, melancholy and earthy defiance within heartbeats of each other. Gerard Cooke does his best work this reviewer has seen as James, a febrile, frightened creature who has been trying to suppress his own gifts and the dark memories they bring back. And Duncan Bonner is on fine form as William, the urbane, well-tailored and unflappable politico and power-

wielder who hopes to channel his two young protégés to his own ends.

An atmospheric, well-performed play that, although it could have done with more clarity, steeps us in the doubts, fears, desires and moral quandaries of the strange, fearful yet promising postwar era.



Steve Wright