

Review of The Darkroom



"Secret remorse versus loving relationships"

by Arthur Duncan for remotegoat on 05/10/11



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Inspired simple-mindedness led Theatre West Artistic Directors, Alison Comley & Ann Stiddard to offer old photographs to Bristol-based playwrights with the challenge "Choose a picture & write us a play."

Top-rated results are presented in this year's Theatre West Season at The Alma Tavern and first-up is Steve Lambert's complex three-hander, *The Darkroom*, inspired by a faded image of three people taking tea on a lawn. Lambert sets his play in 1949, when austerity caused by wartime deprivation still blighted the lives of everyone across Britain and memories of war-time events were still fresh..

Lambert's imaginative narrative, enticingly drip-feeds morsels of the back story upon which hangs anticipation of the resolution to come. Three clearly defined characters enter in turn and attract immediate interest. Conversation among them is never dull and compels attention as talk meanders over intriguing matters, revealing tensions, concerns, and the sensitivities of their relationships.

Pameli Benham has thoroughly embraced Lambert's story and has cast it appropriately, to give life to the script, varying its pace by her firm direction. "Fifty miles from London," Faye - admirably and robustly played by Charlotte Ellis - struggles to hold together her marriage to James, no longer the personality she married, since his stressful years breaking codes and being involved in an event that left him a nervous wreck and behaving strangely: A fine portrayal by Gerard Cooke, of intense preoccupation and introverted paranoia, skilfully executed. James is even more anxious than usual about the impending confrontation with William, formerly a colleague, from whom he 'took' Faye.

Faye is given a 'full-on' portrayal by Charlotte Ellis, playing the pivotal dynamo, powering the plot forward despite James's fears and extraordinary reticence. She prepares a picnic tea out on the lawn to welcome an expected visitor, old friend, landlord & Faye's former lover, William. From William's arrival onward, Faye's natural milieu is between the men by whom she is loved, allowing her some control of events but leaving her vulnerable to surprises.

William is a significant presence in the shape of Duncan Bonner, a convincing man of substance, a chameleon garbed in the fashion of the time; former communist since turned landlord, dabbling in capitalism and playing his cards very close to his chest. What is the purpose of his visit?

Underlying unspoken hints about that war-time catastrophe, are secrets threatening huge personal consequences reflecting the real life, unbearable pressures upon individuals who had conducted the back-room business of armed conflict but post-war, find society and the Law has reverted to its previous, narrow-minded, self-righteous condemnation of private sexual conduct; reducing heroes of our desperate hours to self-effacing, peace-time shadows of their potential stature; even to sacrificial guinea-pigs for inept psychological experimenters. Obliquely, *The Darkroom* refers to all this and more.

A worthy opening to Theatre West Season, *The Darkroom* continues at The Alma Tavern - Theatre Upstairs only until October 15th (to be succeeded by Penny Gunter's "Dorian's Second Life.")

The Alma's food & booze are of a quality to complement the plays.

Event venues and times

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Alma Tavern Theatre | 18-20 Alma Vale Road,
Clifton, Bristol, BS8 2HY
