

# British Theatre Guide

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## Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean

Ed Graczyk

Upstairs at the Gatehouse  
(2009)

Probably best known from Robert Altman's movie version in which Cher reprised the role she played on Broadway in 1982 (also directed by Altman), Ed Gracz's play was first produced in 1976. It is set in a 5 and dime store in a small town in western Texas, close to where James Dean's last movie *Giant* was shot on location. Here a group of women, at least one of whom had been an extra in the film, who at that time formed themselves into a fan group calling themselves the Disciples of James Dean, are getting together again to mark the twentieth anniversary of his death.

Piera Lizzeri's set, originally designed for a recent RADA production that sparked this lively Gatehouse revival directed by John Plews, is largely taken up by the lunch counter over which a crucifix and one of those religious pictures of a decidedly non-Semitic Christ reflect owner Juanita's bible-belt Christianity but are insignificant compared to the shrine to James Dean that surrounds the juke-box. There is not much merchandise on display and no customers, but perhaps we can assume the action all takes place after closing time.

Jenny Marlowe's rather strait-laced Juanita makes a great contrast to her flighty assistant Sissy (Julie Rose Smith, who gives her dizziness a solid centre), still fantasising that she can join a visiting Ice-capades show, even though her experience is on roller-skates. Then there's asthmatic Mona, clinging to her moment of screen fame - in one shot you can momentarily sort her flickering image behind Elizabeth Taylor's head - and more importantly the claim that her illegitimate son - the unseen Jimmie Dean of the title - was fathered by the film star. As played by Adrienne Matzen you feel she really believes her self-delusions, and her colleagues go along with them although they clearly don't.

These three have stayed in small town McCarthy, but returning for the memorial reunion are Stella May (a strong performance from Kathryn Georghiou), power-dressed and driving a Porsche, who has made it into money, the mousey and serially pregnant Edna Louise (Coren Fitzgerald), and the confident and illusion-less Joanne (Eleanor Boyce giving a multi-layered characterisation) whom enigmatically no one seems to recognize.

It is a reunion that reopens all the conflicts of their youth and though the sustained fast-talking Texan accents make some of the dialogue incomprehensible the air buzzes with bitchiness and old resentments. At times you are not quite sure what is going on - and things are complicated by overlapping flashbacks to 1955 with the younger versions of three of the characters played by Mona Drummond, Catherine Nix-Collins and Josh Boyd Rochford, but out of the confusion emerge glimpses of a number of very serious themes from romantic incompatibilities to male rape, life's disappointments and marital problems to trans-sexuality. These don't get much explored and the

overall mood is of rather upbeat cynicism. It is all given great vitality by the performers, though some of them do seem a little young for women who must surely be approaching their late thirties.

Plews' production perhaps places too much emphasis on the humour and could occasionally do with taking breath. It is good to hear an audience laughing but I think there might just be more here than was actually coming over.

*Until 18th October 2009*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)