

British Theatre Guide

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A Taste of Honey

Shelagh Delaney

Hull Truck Theatre and Derby Theatre

Derby Theatre

29 April–10 May 2014

When Mark Babych chose Shelagh Delaney's "kitchen sink" drama *A Taste of Honey* for his first play as artistic director of Hull Truck, his idea was to update it so that it feels "fresh and vibrant" to a modern audience, according to his programme notes.

Yet the play, which premièred in 1958 when the author was only 19, is a work of its time; its issues of morality, discrimination and prejudice had resonance at the time and still do today.

The language is such that the play can shock quite easily: lines such as the character Helen's proclamation that her daughter's effeminate friend Geoff is a "pansified little freak" are probably more disturbing now than when they were written.

Yet some of the power and pathos of Delaney's script is lost in this production as the cast bring out the humour in the piece. The most glaring example is when Helen's drunken husband Peter demands that she leaves her heavily pregnant daughter to return home with him. The sadness is diminished as sections of the audience are laughing at Peter's drunken antics.

Set in Salford in the 1950s, *A Taste of Honey* is the story of Jo, a teenage working-class girl and her mother Helen, a man-mad habitual drinker. Both want to escape the drudgery of their lives, Helen by finding a man with money and Jo by getting away from her mother.

Helen takes up with Peter who is ten years younger. Jo, who has never had a boyfriend, begins a relationship with Jimmie, a black sailor. He makes her pregnant before going off to sea and she never sees him again.

The success of the evening is Rebecca Ryan as Jo. She totally captures the essence of the part, portraying a vulnerable yet headstrong young woman who knows she wants something better in her life but circumstances conspire against her.

She is completely credible as the talented youngster who is angry, resentful and at times frightened about what is happening to her.

Christopher Hancock also gives a satisfying performance as Geoff, neatly understated as a man struggling to come to terms with his sexuality and not turning into a parody of someone who is gay. His scenes with Rebecca Ryan are some of the most touching of the evening.

Julie Riley's portrayal of Helen shows that she is split between concern for her daughter and her desire for self-improvement. But I feel there could be more light and shade—the character is one-dimensional instead of being a woman striving for a better existence who is let down by her working-class roots and common demeanour.

James Weaver as Peter does not appear to be much younger than Helen and overstates the lecherous, drunken aspects of the role.

Lekan Lawal as Jimmie comes over almost as a friendly giant who is tender enough towards Jo—but there is little warmth in the portrayal.

There is also some off-key and discordant singing from the cast which serves as a scene-set but adds little enjoyment.

There is a fascinating comparison to be made between society's values at the time of *A Taste of Honey* and how they are perceived now. But I would have preferred a more conventional take on Delaney's classic.

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)