

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Airswimming

Charlotte Jones

Hen and Chickens Theatre

(2010)

Premiered 1997 at BAC this two-hander is set in a mental hospital. When is somewhat obscure. This production directed by Brendan Lovett and designed by Jude Chalk, it is set in a bath house. Its shiny metal buckets and tub and its pale blue tiles suggest a pristine world devoid of association or meaning apart from a picture of the obscure saint after whom the institution is named.

At the beginning, a disoriented, apparently new arrival finds what seems to be a slightly older woman polishing the floor who tells her it's 1924 - but is it? We soon discover the new inmate is obsessed with Doris Day and knows all her songs and films.

The newcomer doesn't know why she's there: she knows she's been ill and daddy brought her here to recuperate - but he also called her vile names. The older woman, who now takes her under her wing, says that *she* is being punished for being a witch but what becomes increasingly clear is that both women have been incarcerated here by their families because they gave birth to illegitimate babies.

The elder seems perfectly sane, though she has seems to identify with the military and admires soldierly order and discipline. She knows that you have to follow orders if you are going to have a quiet life and only at moments do either of them thing of release or escape. They have become totally institutionalised and delusions and episodes of derangement are due to their incarceration. While one escapes into Doris Day romance the other leads them both in a sort of escapist synchronised swimming but there are echoes of electrotherapy treatments as the action moves backwards and forwards in what must be half a century of being in the asylum.

Ellen Gylan as the younger woman and Jane Dodd as the elder play exactly what the script gives them. For these women their lives don't exist outside it and the fascination of the play lies in the slight changes that constantly occur in their relationship, in the glimpses that you get of what their lives were before they were shut up, what might have happened to them. There is no real plot, other than a change in the balance between them, in who is responsible for the other.

Shocking though their situation is - and there were many girls who were considered, like them, 'moral delinquents' who suffered a similar fate - this is a play full of humour and with these actresses there are moments of genuine joy as they claim their own right to pleasure when the sky sparkles for them.

*Run ends 22nd May 2010*

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