

British Theatre Guide

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Betty Blue Eyes

Book by Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, music by George Stiles, lyrics by Anthony Drewe, based on the film *A Private Function*, screenplay by Alan Bennett

Novello Theatre
(2011)

Betty Blue Eyes is an old-fashioned, feelgood musical comedy. Despite the change of title, it is based on *A Private Function*, the much-loved, Alan Bennett-scripted comedy film starring Michael Palin and Dame Maggie Smith as a Yorkshire couple struggling to make ends meet just after the war.

Sir Richard Eyre determinedly evokes the spirit of 1947 from the opening British Movietone News footage to the final celebrations of a royal wedding. This though was the age of rationing, far outstripping our own poor imitations of austerity, though the happy couple 64 years ago did not look as if they were often reduced to Spam like their loyal subjects.

The stream of catchy tunes from George Stiles and the choreography of Stephen Mear, along with Tim Hatley's traditional design, are all fixed in their period, as is the Bennett story-telling style.

The plot is simple enough. Reece Shearsmith plays a meek chiropodist Gilbert Chilvers who suffers from a socially climbing wife, Sarah Lancashire as Joyce, and hellish mother-in-law, amusingly portrayed by Ann Emery.

After a series of slights from the smug town councillors, led by David Bamber as the obnoxious Dr Swaby, their hope of a surgery on the High Street is dashed as easily as the desire for an occasional meal containing fresh produce.

It doesn't help that meat is rationed and the food inspector, expertly played by Adrian Scarborough as a neo-Nazi complete with Hitler moustache, keeps arresting the butchers.

The focal point is a private function to which the Chilvers are not invited. This will be graced with pork for 150 from a single, pig illegally raised with the assistance of the snooty councillors, one of whom has the hots for sweet Betty Blue Eyes herself.

This is not *Coronation Street* favourite Miss Lancashire, nor some gorgeous chorus girl but the afore-mentioned porker. To be fair, she is a wonder of animatronics (from the head up) with a really winning way and the kind of come hither eyes usually reserved for pantomime cows.

Somehow a pignap (*sic*) leads to comedy and a mutually happy ending hailed by an almost *Wizard of Oz* song, *The Pig is Alive* (rather than *The Witch is Dead*).

This 2½ hour show is great fun, underpinned by the witty words and characteristic humour of Alan Bennett. The music is upbeat and features a stream of hummable songs starting with the charming *Magic Fingers* and also including *Pig No Pig* and the titles songs from play and film. Similarly, the

dance numbers are effective and *Lionheart* at the Primrose Ballroom fantastic. The lyrics are not always of the same quality, too often going for the tackiest of rhymes.

The two big names, Reece Shearsmith and Sarah Lancashire, acquit themselves well as singers and form a strong comic double act, ensuring numerous laughs, if not necessarily any great depth to the evening.

Betty Blue Eyes may not set the world alight but it should prove popular, both for the casting and production qualities, as well as its ability to turn austerity into a source of rich comedy.

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Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)