

British Theatre Guide

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Dancing In My Dreams

Neil Duffield

Oxfordshire Theatre Company

Octagon Theatre, Bolton, and touring

(2009)

Oxfordshire Theatre Company is commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the commencement of World War II and its own thirtieth anniversary with this new commission from playwright Neil Duffield about the effects of evacuation on the children who were sent away from their homes and families and on the rural communities that they were unwillingly foisted upon.

Kathleen and her sister live with their Irish mother and no father in London, but bombs are dropping around them and so the children prepare to be evacuated to an unknown place in the country. When they arrive, the sisters are separated and Kathleen finds herself forced upon a reluctant family of kindly Jack who walks with a stick after a work-related accident, his wife Freda who exhibits all the cruelest traits of religious and moral superiority and prejudice and their equally cruel daughter Pamela who lies to deliberately get Kathleen into trouble. Eventually she finds a friend in new girl Monica and teaches her the Astaire and Rogers songs and dances that her mother taught her, until they get an unexpected visitor in their secret hideaway.

The play is punctuated by songs from Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical films and others popular in the period, including "Top Hat", "Cheek To Cheek", "Run Rabbit Run" and several refrains of "Over The Rainbow" that provide a dreamy recurring theme to the show. These are all sung *a capella* and are sometimes sung in the context of the show and sometimes by the cast in top hat and tails (there are a lot of impressively-rapid costume changes for this small cast).

There is a solid heart to the play but it takes rather a long time to get going, largely due to the many songs at the beginning which don't contribute a lot and actually get in the way of the story. Once we get to the station at the other end and see the way the evacuated children are treated, there are some truly emotional scenes and plenty of injustices to stir up the moral indignation of adults and children. There are some elements that are quite adult but others that make it look like a play written for children, including some corny, juvenile humour (admittedly appreciated loudly by the juveniles in the audience) and some gratuitous wartime facts that appear to have been forced into the dialogue as points of discussion for teachers or parents afterwards.

There is an intriguing but underdeveloped recurring thread of 'the other' throughout the play that surfaces in a few different ways. Obviously the Germans are 'the other' trying to bomb the good ol' British, but the city children are treated as aliens who lack cleanliness and morality by their rural guardians, and when Freda learns that Kathleen's mother is Irish, a single parent and not 'chapel' she seems ready to explode with moral indignation. There is also an interesting comment near the beginning when Kathleen's mother tells her the Germans are trying to take over the world and Kathleen retorts that she used to say the English were trying to do this.

The whole play is performed by a tight ensemble of just five actors. Lauren Cocoracchio is excellent as Kathleen and is the most convincing when playing a child; the others all overact the childishness at least part of the time. There is also some impressive multi-role playing from Katrina Gibson as Kathleen's mother and the sour-faced Pamela and Debbie Leigh-Simmons as Kathleen's sister and the stern moralist Freda. Lois Unwin also plays several roles, as does token male Jonathan Metcalf, including a touching portrayal of Jack. Director Karen Simpson has created some tightly-paced, intense and emotional scenes, but there are other times when the pace goes slack and the actors are left floundering a bit.

Overall, this is a play and a production that has an interesting, multi-layered and intensely-emotional story for all the family crying to get out but it is a little overwhelmed a lot of the time by things that contribute nothing to the story and therefore the themes are left under-explored, but it still manages to produce some moments of real drama that are worth seeing.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)