

British Theatre Guide

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Good to Firm

Ed Waugh and Trevor Wood
Customs Huse, South Shields
(2002)

In an ideal world there would be three levels of subsidised theatre: at the top of the pyramid would be the major national companies, such as the RSC and the National. As a support to them would be the regional theatres, at least one to each area of the country, and here we are talking about, for example, the West Yorkshire Playhouse, the Manchester Royal Exchange or the Salisbury Playhouse. Supporting them would be a network of local theatres, serving particular areas within the regions.

The national companies would function as the RSC and RNT do now, showcasing the best in British theatre, both classic and new writing. The regional level would operate on a similar basis but, in their new writing function, would focus on writers from the region. The local theatres would be the seed bed, a place in which new actors, technicians and writers could earn their professional spurs.

Of course, some - performers, techies, writers - would, as now, hit the big time straightaway, or find themselves taken up at a regional level, as the Traverse, for example, found Gregory Burke.

In an ideal world... But we don't live in an ideal world. The national companies do what we expect of them (although whether the RSC, under the new dispensation, will be as effective as it has been is an open question), and, in general, the regional companies also fulfil their role. It's at the local level that the ideal system is lacking: far too often, local theatres are receiving houses, often presenting their own pantomime and otherwise the only truly local product is amateur and is certainly not new writing.

South Shields' Customs House is a fine example of what a local theatre should be. It does, of course, function as a receiving house; it does present local amateur companies; it does feature a wide range of the performing arts, from drama through dance to music of all kinds; but in the last couple of years, under the directorship of Ray Spencer, it has increasingly featured new local writing, performed by local actors under local directors.

Ed Waugh and Trevor Wood were both originally journalists, working in the North East, and *Good to Firm* is their first play. As the title suggests, it is based in the world of horse racing and the local press - and the racing world - has very much taken it to heart, somewhat to its detriment because, although the "sport of kings" provides the background, the play is essentially about relationships and has much more to say about them than about racing.

It's a comedy, and the first-night audience loved it, roaring with laughter from the off. It's about the relationships between married couple Bob (Ray Spencer, taking a week off running the venue) and Shirley (Angela Szalay), Bob's oldest friend Philippa (Patrica L Haws) and her fiancé Les (Mark

Allan). It teeters on the edge of sentimentality on a few occasions, particularly right at the end, but a well-timed gag pulls it back from the brink.

Most first plays benefit from judicious cutting but Waugh and Wood, as journalists, are obviously used to cutting their writing to the bone and there were very few occasions where there was any sense of superfluity. There were, however, one or two odd quirks of direction: in particular in a series of short scenes switching between the women in the house and the men in the pub, the latter being downstage left, in a small pool of light. For some strange reason, the director Dennis Jobling had the men moving their table off for the switch to the house, then back on again. As the "pub" was in darkness during the house scenes, there seemed to be no reason for this: all it achieved was to slow the play down.

However this is a minor quibble and takes nothing away from the success of the show. The performances were strong: Ray Spencer was nicely bumbling and pathetic, whilst Patricia Haws was scheming and manipulative Philippa - and very glamorous, a perfect contrast to Angela Szalay's Shirley (who has "let herself go" but retains the power to hold on to her man). Mark Allan's Les became increasingly unbelievable until the dénouement made everything perfectly clear.

Not cutting-edge drama by any means, but a well-written, well-performed play which has something to say about the oddities of human relationships, and which entertains its audience hugely. Just, in fact, the sort of thing that local theatres should be doing!

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)