

British Theatre Guide

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How To Be Happy

David Lewis

Orange Tree, Richmond

(2011)

Two households, both with the same settee. A settee that gets lolled on, cried on, argued on, walked on and shagged on over the course of David Lewiss lively and thoughtful new play at Richmonds Orange Tree. Directed by its author, *How To Be Happy* unfolds in a series of overlapping, parallel scenes that take place in the separate - yet deeply interconnected - homes of Emma (Kate Miles) and Paul (Paul Kemp), a divorced couple now living with their new partners Graham (Steven Elder) and Katy (Carolyn Backhouse).

Each couple has its problems. Paul, a struggling writer, has been diagnosed with lung cancer, while Graham and Emmas relationship is undergoing strain, not helped by the presence of a very vocal new baby. Meanwhile, Graham, an advertising executive whos currently (and hilariously) brainstorming notions of happiness in order to best promote a new chocolate bar, wants Paul to collaborate on the campaign.

Flitting between the two houses, and delivering sometimes indiscreet dispatches from each, is Paul and Emmas teenage daughter Daisy (Kate Lamb), whos harbouring hopes of bringing her parents back together.

At first, Lewiss conceit of having the two families simultaneously occupy the same space in overlapping scenes feels clunky and obtrusive. But the structure moves into elegance as the evening progresses, creating some effective juxtapositions between the events in the two households: rhyming incidents of domestic discord and complicity. The relationships are, for the most part, sharply drawn, and just when you think Lewis is about to take a swerve into sentimentality youre surprised by some unanticipated twist or acerbic observation.

The thematic focus of *How To Be Happy* is - you guessed! - the concept of happiness, and, in particular, its relationship to consumerism. Paul (in one of the plays improbabilities, or, at least, heavy-handed ironies) once wrote a self-help book on the subject of happiness and has worked in the advertising industry himself. But he has now come to disdain Grahams profession, which he views as responsible for the sorry state of a society in which people feel pressured to spend money they dont have to buy things they dont need to impress people they dont like.

Whats most admirable about Lewiss writing, though, is that it refuses to employ the characters simply as one-dimensional representations of a particular idea. Rather, the people here are believably inconsistent muddles of contradictions, each with his or her measure of awareness and neurosis.

Graham may represent the horrors of consumer capitalism to Paul, but Steven Elders expert performance presents Graham as a rather ineffectual man, affable and eager to please, and nursing his own sense of futility and disillusionment. (Its not until the end that we see a trace of

steeliness.) Similarly, Pauls rants against consumerism are, as his ex-wife points out, somewhat undermined by his own attachment to his iPhone.

The raspy-voiced Paul Kemp doesnt fall into the trap of trying to make the disappointed, rather whiny Paul too sympathetic or easily appealing, and the other roles are played with equal bite. As Emma, Kate Miles brilliantly conveys the insecurity and frustration of a woman whos walked away from one unsatisfactory marriage only to find herself in another. And although the characterisation of Daisy takes an unfortunate late slide into psychobabble, Kate Lamb (a young actress to watch) is spot-on as the daddys girl.

Some moments fail to completely convince - the growing intimacy between Graham and Katy, in particular - and the plays contemporary allusions - Lady Gaga, *The X Factor* - occasionally feel pat.

But Lewis spry production nicely conveys the shifts in tone of his writing, as the mood moves from broad comedy to contemplation, with the action underscored by classical pieces that range from jaunty, brisk baroque to the drama of Schuberts *Winterreise* (a good break-up CD, in Pauls definition). And the productions truly delicious closing moments, which leave one character alone on stage and make the best use of The Ronettes Be My Baby since the opening of Scorseses *Mean Streets*, are perfectly judged. Lewis play has its glib and undeveloped elements, but at it best it reflects wittily and poignantly on the way we live now.

Running until 5th November

Reviewer: [Alex Ramon](#)