

British Theatre Guide

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

Looking for Buddy

Alan Plater, music by Alan Barnes

Octagon, Bolton, and Live, Newcastle, co-production

Live Theatre, Newcastle

(2009)

Tim Healy returns to Live, of which he was one of the original co-founders back in 1973, for the first time in sixteen years to play a part which could have been (and probably was) written for him.

Phil, a failed architect with an encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and a love for Raymond Chandler's novels, becomes involved - by accident (although possibly not) - in the hunt for a recording by early jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden (whose work, everyone knows, was never recorded). This further involves a seedy jazz club, The Blue Note, in Wallsend's "lower east side"; a blonde broad, Ella, who is a waitress at the club; the club's owner, the thin Fat Jack ("outside every thin man is a fat man trying to get in"); Phil's sister, Marxist Bella; ex-shipyard worker Frank who runs a cafe, and regeneration company The Good Earth Corporation, represented by the scarily cool and powerful Zelda and whose ultimate owners are have their registered office in a shed in the Cayman Islands.

The regeneration of the area, Northern Rock, sub-prime mortgages, coal, quantitative easing, toxic debt, international companies, iconic buildings and legendary NE comic Bobby Thomspson are all touched on in a paper-thin plot which makes numerous political points whilst continually amusing and entertaining.

At the same time it's a musical, with an on-stage band playing Alan Barnes' heavily jazz-influenced songs, superbly performed by all of the cast, and providing incidental music.

The Beiderbecke Affair meets *Close the Coalhouse Door?* In some ways, yes: there are certainly quite a number of references to *Coalhouse* which brought a chuckle from those who remember the iconic 1968 play, but Plater keeps the politics in the background whilst concentrating on the entertainment.

And entertain it does: there are lots of one-liners, nice pastiche of the *film noir* genre, songs serious and amusing (a lovely skiffle send-up at one point), engaging characters. One does wonder, however, how much the Bolton audience (where the play premiered under the direction of the Octagon's artistic director Mark Babych) missed. This is very definitely a Tyneside play and, beneath the fun and music and apart from the credit crunch references, lies a lament for the passing of the old Tyneside. Phil takes a trip along the river and, instead of the ship building and repair yards, see nice marinas and new housing, all made out of "ticky-tacky" - yet another of many references. A moment of real sadness - and a little ironic in that Live is on the Quayside next to the very modern law courts and opposite the iconic Sage across the river in Gateshead with the two linked, just a couple of hundred yards away, by the Millennium Bridge.

One could almost call it a chamber musical as it fits the intimacy of Live perfectly, bringing the actors close to the audience.

Babych (in his penultimate production for the Octagon) keeps the piece moving at a cracking pace and his cast - Tim Healy (Phil), Jayne McKenzie (Ella), Phil Corbitt (Frank), Jane Holman (Bella), Jacqueline Boatswain (Zelda) and Nicholas Lumley (Fat Jack) - are all spot-on.

"Looking for Buddy" runs at Live until 13th June, 2009

David Chadderton [reviewed](#) the production's premiere in Bolton

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)