

British Theatre Guide

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Looking Good Dead

Shaun McKenna adapting the book by Peter James

Peter James and Joshua Andrews

The Lowry, Salford

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Adapted from the novel by Peter James, Shaun McKenna's *Looking Good Dead* is an ambitious attempt to conceal a domestic drama and a morality tale within the format of a thriller.

The Bryce family are having problems. Father Tom (Adam Woodyatt) has over-extended his business to the point of bankruptcy. Stress pushes wife Kellie (Gaynor Faye) into compulsively drinking / cleaning / spending (sometimes at the same time). Teenage son Max (Luke Ward-Wilkinson) plots to emulate his alienated half-brother and escape the family home as soon as possible and, in the meantime, has sneakily accessed his mother's online bank account without her knowledge.

Underlying tensions are pushed to the surface when Tom accidentally gains access to a particularly sordid online porn site which exposes the family to threats from criminals and attracts unwanted attention from detective Roy Grace (Harry Long) who is investigating possibly related murders. The Bryce family's problems rapidly extend to include intimidation and kidnapping.

Author Peter James is unusual in favouring theatre over television for adaptations of his novels. However, the process creates challenges. The need to compress information spread across pages into brief speeches leads to awkward dialogue in which, upon introduction, characters verbally rattle off their backstories (that actually have no impact upon the plot). More significantly, the ability to conceal significant plot points within pages of text is lost on stage where any unusual details stand out. As a result, it is not too difficult to work out the identity of the mysterious criminal mastermind.

There is an attempt to build a mood of gallows humour, although the comment about a pornographer wanting to move upmarket by graduating to 'snuff' movies featuring actual murders may not have been intended to sound funny.

Designer Michael Holt's ingenious set is highly adaptive. A feature wall in a posh ultra-modern residence turns within seconds into a grisly pornographic film set.

The decision to push the family drama into the foreground results in the police procedural aspects of the story being rushed to the point where it seems the officers can solve clues within seconds of them being spotted. The murder of a sex offender is no sooner reported than resolved and the wordplay around the name of a particular type of beetle is dealt with so quickly the significance does not register. The police are reduced from characters solving crimes into a plot device—a means of explaining connections between events to the audience. There is also a touching faith in the ability of average teenagers to resolve any technical problem within a few seconds on a computer.

Even with the domestic drama prioritised, the compromises imposed by the theatre format allows issues such as the morality of concealing information from the police for fear of reprisals to be raised but not really explored. As a result, the stage version of *Looking Good Dead* does not completely satisfy as a family drama or as a thriller. To an extent, the play is hamstrung by expectations—fans of the original novel will expect to see detective Roy Grace on stage even though he is reduced to a rather colourless character.

It might have been more satisfying to be daring enough to reduce the police presence still further, as in *Go Back For Murder*, the stage adaptation of Christie's *Five Little Pigs*, which omitted the character of Poirot. This might allow the family crisis and the moral pressure to do the right thing to be explored in greater depth.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)