

British Theatre Guide

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The Safari Party

Tim Firth

Richmond Theatre and touring

(2006)

Runcorn *arrivistes*, Esther and Lol, have moved a few miles into the Cheshire farm belt and are ready to fall for any dodgy tale of county traditions while furnishing their converted barn, its posh new conservatory packed with expensive fake rusticity.

But Esther now has her eyes set on an antique porcelain tea service, on sale at Bygone Cheshire. And in the hope of getting a useful discount has arranged a Safari dinner party, a roving meal starting with *hors d'oeuvres* at the farmhouse down the road, entrees served at her own dining table, ending up for desserts at the home of Inga, the dodgy dealer.

To match these three courses, playwright Tim Firth has created a three-act format, now almost unknown in contemporary theatre, but still happily contained within a two-hour running time, despite the intervention of two 20-minute intervals while the stage crew struggle to rearrange the timbered settings.

In fact the progress of the dinner is the least thing on offer. Farm boys Daniel and Adam (David Brown and Jack Ryder), still recovering from their dads recent death, are serving a few frozen funeral baked meats as starters. But Daniel is alarmed when faced with Inga, having told her a family fairy story to talk up the value of their bullet-holed kitchen table, a grisly reminder of their fathers sudden demise, while making a cool sixty quid on the car boot deal.

Sparks soon fly between Inga (Illona Linthwaite) and the chuckling boys egged on by Esthers daughter Bridget (Helen Noble) and the party swiftly descends into anarchy leading to the first interval. But the real fun starts in the second act as the boys discover that their old kitchen table was flogged to Lol and Esther for two-grand as a genuine example of a Cheshire booty-ball dining table, a table-top golf course complete with miniature clubs

Not to labour this plot description, Lol finally loses his rag and leads a raiding party on Ingas outhouse, as the the play disintegrates into black farce with some decidedly ragged changes of direction and motivation.

The real surprise is that this is the plays second revival since it first opened at the Stephen Joseph in 2002, where it was generally well received in a premiere production directed by Alan Ayckbourn.

Now with a third completely new cast directed by David Taylor, and with hefty new settings by designer Julie Godfrey, it looks a thinly developed not especially funny comedy although to be fair, I saw it on the second night of the tour when it suffered a reduced audience, grudging with its laughter.

The standout performances come from veterans Christopher Timothy as Lol, winging his comedy lines to the back of the stalls, and Sara Crowe as Esther with an artfully demure Runcorn accent, a

cool mistress of developing situations she can never quite grasp or cope with both giving their all.

Catch this Producing Partners revival on tour at Guildford 24-29 April, Bath 1-6 May, Crawley 9-13 May, Eastbourne 22-27 May, and Salford 5-10 June, 2006

Reviewer: [John Thaxter](#)