

British Theatre Guide

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Snake in the Grass

Alan Ayckbourn

The Print Room, Notting Hill

(2011)

Sir Alan Ayckbourn is best known for witty social comedies so *Snake in the Grass* comes as something of a surprise.

The writer suggests in his original programme note from 2002 that this is a ghost story but such a classification is somewhat misleading, with the plotting having closer similarities to *Deathtrap*.

Snake in the Grass benefits from an outstanding holistic set from William Dudley that threatened to outshine the play and arguably did so. He has lovingly decked out The Print Room's playing space as a traverse with, between the spectators, a now sadly overgrown tennis court of the kind that used to grace the over-sized back gardens of the well-to-do, complete with umpires chair and rotting net.

The good times have long ago disappeared as the play opens with the return to the family pile of haughty Annabel (she prefers Annie), played by Susan Wooldridge. There she re-joins her younger sister, Sarah Woodward's haggard, haunted Miriam.

Annabel has come back to suburban London following the death of their father, a believer in tough love, or, as it might more accurately described in this case, child abuse.

Before she finds her sister, Annabel receives a strange approach from Mossie Smith as lippy Alice, the nurse who looked after the old man until she was summarily sacked by Miriam.

Her story is compelling. Miriam has allegedly murdered her father after being driven mad by decades of thankless service.

After a swift confession, the sisters face an awkward session as they try to negotiate a laughably small pay-off to the blackmailing nurse.

The play then takes on a supernatural quality that could be in the minds of the victims but might be something else, before an unexpected series of twists in the tail.

Despite an atmospheric staging by Lucy Bailey, enhanced by Richard Howell's lighting, this drama does not offer enough surprises to come off.

As with *Deathtrap*, there is a problem if viewers manage to second guess the playwright. In addition, the genre obliges one to buy into coincidence and carefully contrived behavioural patterns and that can be difficult.

This leaves the play at its best in the most familiar territories of Ayckbourn land with the portrayal of two inadequate women who have not recovered from troubled childhoods even by middle age.

Running until 5th March

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)