

# British Theatre Guide

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

## The Card

Arnold Bennett, adapted by Deborah McAndrew  
New Vic Theatre in association with Claybody Theatre  
New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme  
20 May–10 June 2023

Arnold Bennett has largely been forgotten outside his native Staffordshire, yet he was one of the most prolific writers of his time. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he produced 34 novels, seven volumes of short stories and 13 plays—not forgetting his daily journal totalling more than a million words.

One of his lighter novels, *The Card*, gained Bennett wider recognition: in 1952, it was turned into a film starring Alec Guinness and Petula Clark. Twenty years later, the songwriting team of Tony Hatch and Jackie Trent composed the score for a musical version in the West End.

Now the married couple Deborah McAndrew and Conrad Nelson, joint artistic directors of Claybody Theatre, have come up with a sparkling version of Bennett's work which not only includes a community company but also the Acceler8 brass band.

*The Card* features Edward Henry Machin, called Denry by his seamstress mother, getting a job with a solicitor who is also the town clerk. Denry invites himself to a ball his boss is organising where he audaciously asks the elegant Countess of Chell for a dance, a move that changes his life.

From then on, Denry—"I'm an adventurer, not a clerk"—takes advantage of every opportunity that comes his way. He becomes a rent collector, an estate agent and a money lender but he also gets a reputation as a philanthropist whose generosity is unrivalled.

He earns a reputation as a "card" or a character who is "identified with the great cause of cheering us all up".

In an excellent ensemble production, New Vic regular Gareth Cassidy gives a heart-warming performance as Denry. He is charming, affable and endearing so that the audience wants him to succeed in everything he does. That involves trying to become the youngest mayor in the history of Bursley—a fictitious town based on Burslem in the Potteries—and finding a wife.

There is sadness when his first relationship ends due to his fiancée's extravagance with money, but the audience finds relief and joy when Denry discovers true love.

Cassidy inhabits the character, being able to say so much with facial expressions which can be extreme but never descend into the ridiculous.

It's not only Denry who cheers us up. The whole company enthusiastically and stylishly bring Nelson's vision for the show to life.

There's a standout performance from bearded Howard Chadwick, who gives a magnificent portrayal as Denry's staid, unadventurous mother who can't believe there's such a huge change in

Denry's standing in society.

Also catching the eye are Jessica Dyas as Ruth Earp, who seductively attracts Denry as she drops sugar lumps into his tea, Molly Roberts as the Countess of Chell, who falls for Denry's amiability, and Eddy Westbury, who gives individuality to the five roles he plays.

The only downside is that, occasionally, the talented brass band unintentionally drowns out singing from the actors who otherwise don't need microphones.

Nelson has revealed that, for a number of years, local people asked Claybody to do an adaptation of *The Card*. The version the company came up with sold out in 2022 at Fenton Town Hall. It's been revived for a run in-the-round at the New Vic and deserves to have similar success.

**Reviewer:** [Steve Orme](#)