

British Theatre Guide

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The Children

Lucy Kirkwood

Royal Court Theatre Downstairs

17 November 2016–14 January 2017

Lucy Kirkwood must expect to receive constant comparison with Harold Pinter when visitors discuss this post-apocalyptic, dystopian piece.

On one level, it is as if the playwright lauded for the insight for [Chimerica](#) had rewritten [Old Times](#) for senior citizens, while some of the politics and metaphorical associations are also reminiscent of the older writer's oeuvre.

The Children takes place somewhere on the English East Coast in the grungy, Miriam Buether-designed kitchen of Hazel and Robin, highly intelligent if rather dull mid 60-year-old parents of four grown-up children.

As James Macdonald's production opens, after a 38-year gap and a symbolic biff on the nose, Francesca Annis's equally ecologically-named Rose is calming down her hostess.

Immediately, the personalities of the two retired nuclear physicists are established, Deborah Findlay's character as care-worn as her former friend, who spent so many of the intervening years in America, is calm and phlegmatic.

Slowly, audience members are asked to piece together two backstories, one recent the other four decades past.

The cottage is just outside an exclusion zone set up when the local nuclear power plant gave Britain its own dose of Fukushima or Chernobyl.

Nuclear fallout is an obvious concern but in this discordant household other troubles seem more pressing.

Four children ago, the two women had vied for the affections of Ron Cook playing Robin. Even at this late stage, doubts remain about where his loyalties and affections lie, causing friction in an already fraught situation.

However, there is more to *The Children* than an intriguing senior ménage à trois. Lucy Kirkwood introduces a challenging moral dilemma, Rose forcing the home couple to contemplate the meaning of life and the case for altruism in extremis. At the same time, the ethics of nuclear power and its potential fallout inevitably form part of the debate.

There are some longueurs, suggesting that a running time just shy of two hours could be cut quite considerably. Some efforts to this effect might well have taken place in the later stages of rehearsal, given that on opening night the actors (or at least one of them) and their lines were not as well acquainted as one might have expected.

Even so, this drama has its comic moments and does ask some important questions that might seem considerably more pertinent in our uncertain Brave New, Post-European future, governed by the Brexiteers along with Putin, Trump and their cronies.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)