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The Haunting of Blaine Manor

Joe O'Byrne

The King's Arms, Salford

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Wouldn't it be great, in this satellite and cable age, if there were a TV channel devoted entirely to old, black and white films? (On reflection, it might not be so great. I might never find the willpower to drag myself away from the telly.) Maybe Joe O'Byrne has the same yearning...

There are, of course, no such things as ghosts. The mediums, psychics, clairvoyants etc., who claim to be able to contact the dead are just charlatans and fraudsters, preying on the gullible and vulnerable. So says Dr Roy Earle, renowned American parapsychologist. Dr Earle has been invited to Blaine Manor by the current owner, who wants him to debunk the ancient pile's reputation as England's most haunted house.

Unfortunately for Dr Earle, his car skidded off the road and into the lake, taking all his expensive gadgetry with it as it sank. Never mind, with the unshakeable scepticism of a true scientist, Roy Earle feels up to the task at hand, even without his debunking paraphernalia.

When he's not flirting with the glamorous Vivian (Jo Haydock), a journalist employed by the mysterious owner, or belittling the psychic Cairo (Andrew Yates) and the 'more than a medium' Scarabus (Phil Denison), Earle has his own demons to deal with—primarily, the apparent suicide of his wife, in the all-too-recent past.

Unimpressed by a series of hair-raising stories from a weighty tome titled *The History of Blaine Manor*, Earle's composure finally begins to crack after an encounter with Grady (O'Byrne), the polite but sinisterly forceful butler of the manor. The suave but since solicitor, Vincent (Daniel Thackeray) tells him Grady died fourteen years ago.

Is it a trick? Is it the drink? Is it guilt following the death of his wife? While Vivian worries over Roy's mental state, the others are increasingly concerned about a 'presence' in the house. Something dark and very old has been awoken. But what does it want? Who does it want?

The Haunting of Blaine Manor is Joe O'Byrne's bold attempt to bring a hybrid of Hammer horror and Hollywood thriller to the stage. The first act needs a little more pace, plus heavier doses of menace and suspense. To be fair, there is a host of characters to be introduced, a lot of ground work to be done and several false trails to be laid.

Nevertheless, there is wit, style and lots of fun to be had playing 'spot the allusion' (the portraits on the wall look to be straight out of *The House of Usher*). Act two begins in leisurely fashion, but the pace and tension soon pick up, mounting to an impressive finale that delights the audience.

There are ghosts throughout this production—in the nicest possible way. Phil Denison's Scarabus returns Peter Cushing to the land of the living (and the dead), while Andrew Yates's Cairo does not need the nod and the wink of his character's name to conjure up Peter Lorre before our very eyes.

It's not easy to create effects in a fringe production but Darren McGinn (photography and digital media) and Justin Wetherill (sound design) do a fine job. That said, there is room to give the audience more of that ghost train / rollercoaster experience which Hammer did so well.

Rarely have I walked into a fringe show and found myself coveting the props, but the studded leather armchairs and a velvet upholstered chaise longue had me wondering if the show was sponsored by Kendal's—quite a surprise in the otherwise utilitarian setting, upstairs at the King's Arms.

There seems to be a loyal following for this company. Quite right, too. The fine ovation at curtain is well earned. Pay a visit to Blaine Manor, if you can. That's the spirit!

Reviewer: [Martin Thomasson](#)