

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Lionheart Phantom

Tess Humphrey

Grand Dame Theatre Company

Salford Arts Theatre

17–19 March 2016

Salford Arts Theatre has a long and proud history. It was where film stars Sir Ben Kingsley and Albert Finney began to tread the boards. In the last decade it has been reborn as a community theatre.

This production is not in-house but comes from new producer Grand Dame Theatre Company formed in 2015. The play, by rising writer Tess Humphrey, is a farcical comedy which also has a few more serious things to say about a number of issues, including the importance of gay safe spaces, acceptance of all sexualities and also changing attitudes towards transvestites.

Wendy's gay bar The Lionheart has been open for the half century since homosexuality was legalised but it is on its last legs. Empty on Pride Night, all appears to be doomed until her son James, the chief bar man, starts a rumour that the place is haunted and this turns their fortunes around.

The first half catalyst is the visit of the health inspector whose inspection publican Wendy and co fear—with good reason. He gives them a month to sort out the rats and the dodgy décor but changes his tune once he discovers they have a “ghost”.

Wendy has a feisty relationship with her son James who, much to her chagrin, is straight. Wendy proudly declares that he is the product of the first lesbian couple away from Harley St to have IVF. She is determined to close the pub until punters start to arrive to see the ghost.

The cash and the success lead to interest from a TV ghost hunter show which offers Wendy a lot of money to host an edition where their presenter Jason Rathbound will explore the ghostly apparition. Wendy agrees and the end of the first half comes with a lovely rendition of “Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye” and a moving tableau of Wendy as a child—Isabel Ingham—being told stories of his exploits in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War by her soldier Dad played by the same actor as plays her son James.

In the second half, we meet TV presenter Jason Rathbound, a sharp-eyed gay businessman pretending to be a ghost hunter. He doesn't believe in ghosts yet makes his money from appearing to. This is a tour-de-force from Sean Chriscole who channels David Bowie, Marilyn Monroe as well as another character, Lord Ayckham. Most of the comedy comes from his character's cruelty but he does it with such élan that he gets away with it. He is the closest the play comes to having a villain.

The second half is taken up with the holding of a fake séance to extort money from the daughter of the dead aristocrat whom Jason has pretended to contact on the TV show. She is very credibly played with excellent cut-glass accent by the versatile Keziah Lockwood who also doubles as one

of the giddy pub customers who come to see the ghost. The twist which this reviewer will not reveal is just a little bit predictable.

There is a happy ending as the villain gets his comeuppance and Sally and her partner Jane are wed by drag act Misty Chance, Manchester Gay Village regular Christian James D'Arcy. Misty's sparkling gold and yellow outfit outshines all other costumes on the stage.

The first half rattles along at a great pace with regular jokes. It's about the right length for a comedy at around 40 minutes. The second half is perhaps 5 minutes too long at 65 although it too has much to commend it.

Emma McCullen makes a warm connection with the audience as Sally, the rather garrulous barmaid, and has good comic timing. Jane Hamlet is a believable pub landlady and staunch supporter of gay rights. She also has a beautiful alto singing voice. Sam Retford is clearly at home on the stage as James, who is a kind of a Buttons from panto character. He keeps the plot moving but also has some nice bits of comic business. There is solid support from Andrew Marsden as the Health Inspector who believes in ghosts, Rebecca Rose as an assortment of characters including Sally's love interest and Graham Galloway as the old drunk.

Director and co-founder of Grand Dame Theatre Company Sam Hart keeps the piece just the right side of believable yet with enough comic energy to overcome some of the more outlandish and preposterous aspects of the plot. He also offers an effective cameo as the TV director.

This new play has a lot of heart and enough laughs to keep the audience amused. The production is very entertaining and offers a good if broad night out at the theatre, which could grace a bigger auditorium.

**Reviewer:** [Andrew Edwards](#)