

# British Theatre Guide

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

## The Private Ear and the Public Eye

Peter Shaffer

Original Theatre Company and Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

2–7 September 2013

"I feel this play is fundamentally an old-fashioned drawing room comedy and I think that eventually that is how it will play," said Kenneth Williams in rehearsal. It may begin in that manner but he soon found, as do we, that the characters are a little more complex than they seem at first.

Set in 1962, when these two one-act plays were first produced, Bob is nervously arranging a table for dinner as he prepares to entertain a girl he has met at a concert. He wants to make a good impression but has no idea how to go about it, and his bedsit setting is the very opposite of glamorous. Curtains hang haphazardly covering cupboards or kitchen and furnishings are basic to say the least, yet opera posters adorn the walls and his beloved stereo music system is top of the range.

Luckily (or otherwise) friend and work colleague Ted (Rupert Hill) is there to help. Swaggering in, full of confidence and a misplaced belief in his own sophistication and superior knowledge, he takes over the arrangements and, predictably, the girl. Yet Bob's music has invaded his psyche too as, after a short argument, he exits whistling the Toreador song from *Carmen*.

Siobhan O'Kelly's Doreen has not quite achieved the casual sexual freedom that characterised the 'swinging sixties', but she is trying. Nervously clutching a large handbag and clad in fake ocelot fur as her attempt at sophistication, she is awkward and unsure of herself, and not quite as appreciative of Bob's music as he had expected. Bob's creepy interpretation of the lynching scene from *Peter Grimes* not surprisingly makes her quite frightened, but with the beautiful love duet from *Madam Butterfly* she joins Bob in conducting along with the music and is even ready for a kiss—if only he had noticed.

There are laughs in this play, sometimes a little too predictable, but the overall mood becomes heartbreakingly sad as Bob is so obsessed with the perfection of his music that he rejects the imperfect world around him. Yet there is hope that he will learn to accept imperfections as he listens to the now scratched record.

Director Alastair Whatley waits until after the interval to effect the scene change for the second play and, to the music "So Happy Together", the three understudies magically and rhythmically switch Hayley Grindle's very clever set design from bedsit to sophisticated office—quite a treat in itself.

Banker Charles (Jasper Britton) has married a girl half his age and, being a 'control freak', has groomed her to behave in a manner he thinks suitable. She has eventually grown tired of dancing to his tune and her changed demeanour has convinced her husband that there must be another man. There is—but not at all what he expects.

He has hired detective Julian Cristoforou to spy on her and this is Steven Blakeley in a complete reversal of his Bob in the first play. A marvel of eccentricity, unexpected appearances and with vast amounts of quick-fire dialogue, I have to laugh just to think of him. O'Kelly is wife Belinda and again in a reversal of her previous character she is a lively, quirky gamine, and above all happy. (Maggie Smith played these roles in the original production).

Beautifully timed, and hilariously funny, this play is a laugh a minute and, even though the detective is also living in his own all-seeing world, you can't feel sorry for him as he is perfectly happy and in complete, if chaotic, control.

Shaffer is best known for *Equus*, *Amadeus* and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and this could be regarded as one of his lighter plays, but is still filled with philosophical discussions and complex characters. The first major revival for fifty years and, if a little predictable in the first and slightly long-winded in the second, still well worth seeing.

*Touring to Dublin, Bath, Malvern, Milton Keynes, Basingstoke, Cambridge, York and Ipswich.*

**Reviewer:** [Sheila Connor](#)