

Blue Heart

Review by Nicholas Escobar

Blue Heart at the Orange Tree Theatre is a gloriously fun night out at the theatre. The play is witty, brilliantly realized and simply a blast to witness. The acting is some of the best that I have seen in London and the small ensemble plays brilliantly off of one another.

The play is actually two smaller plays that each comprises an act. The first act is *Heart's Desire* and the second act is *Blue Kettle*. *Heart's Desire* is a play that tells the simple story of a family waiting for their daughter to return from the airport after being abroad in Australia. It is not as simple as this however. The wonderful playwright Caryl Churchill turns this simple storyline into a surreal trip for the audience. The scene actually plays out dozens of different storylines. The actors will repeat sections of the script with slight differences. This change is initiated by a specific sound effect and light cue, and the actors will return to a moment prior in the script and redo the scene. This requires an incredible amount of stamina because at many points the actors need to redo the scene in *exactly the same way*. This includes their placement on the stage, their movements and the tone of range of their voice. It was a joy to watch. The entire time I had a smile on my face. Amelda Brown's Alice was harrowing and serious while also being frequently funny. I adored Amanda Boxer's Maisie who is a very old woman that has oddly quirky and off-putting body movements that add to the surreal nature of the scene. Andy de la Tour's Brian is stark and shockingly violent at parts, especially when he tells his son that he wishes he had never been born. This scene addresses the difficulty of waiting, and also what arises when people are left waiting for something to happen. Therefore, one possible reason for the narrative framework of constantly repeating the scene could be a comment on the interminably long experience waiting seems to create. Also, I had a somewhat crazy hypothesis that the narrative structure reveals that all the characters presented are in a purgatorial state where they cannot escape from this constantly repeating form of events.

The second play, *Blue Kettle*, is a very odd play. It is most definitely not as good as *Heart's Desire* but no less unsettling. *Blue Kettle* follows the character of Derek who lies to old women that they are actually his long lost mother. As the play progresses the words "blue" and "kettle" begin to infect the dialogue. They become verbs, oddly placed nouns and adjectives. At the end of the play, the entirety of the dialogue has become also singularly those two words making the dialogue meaningless. At the end, the audience can only rely on the way the actors say these words, and their facial expressions to fully glean meaning from the scene. I felt like this represented the deterioration of Derek's original plan, and also of the sometimes uselessness of words to truly represent emotion.

The Orange Tree Theatre had a large effect of the effectiveness of this production. It is a square theater (similar to the Finborough expect larger with two tiers and audience members on all four sides of the theater space). This theater-in-the-round atmosphere created a communal theater-going experience. I could actively see the audience members

on the opposite side of the stage and their reaction to the action. Equally, they became a part of my reaction of the play, as though they were in the play themselves. There were speakers all on sides of the theater creating a surround sound experience for Max Pappenheim's sound design and music. The actors also expertly used the square stage to their advantage, addressing all sides of the audience and making everyone feel a part of the production.

The sets were brilliantly simple. *Heart's Desire* contained simply a table with chairs and plates and cups with a pancake-like food present. The telephone which Brian speaks into is provided by a stage-hand in black holding up the phone case. *Blue Kettle* had a slightly more complicated set with more living room pieces on the stage, but still the set dressing was very simple. Unlike *The Red Barn*, which relied on entirely realistic sets, *Blue Heart* worked on a smaller scale and relied on their actors to bring reality to the play, not the set.

Actors from *Heart's Desire* also played entirely different parts in *Blue Kettle*. Alex Beckett who played the smaller part of the son in *Heart's Desire* takes center stage as Derek and performs beautifully, with intense emotion. I was impressed by his range of acting from Lewis to Derek. The other actors from *Heart's Desire* did quite well in *Blue Kettle*, taking on different mannerisms to work for the different characters.

What I always like to ask myself concerning productions like this is "Why?". Why have these gimmicks? Why put these two plays together into one show? While I have already answered the question concerning the gimmicks, the later question is equally important. My guess would be that both plays concern a deterioration of some kind. *Heart's Desire* represents the deterioration of plot and time, while *Blue Kettle* is the deterioration of language. Both plays also speak about life in general, *Heart's Desire* harping on the act of waiting, while *Blue Kettle* shows the need of someone to have a connection with another person.

It is not clear as to why these two plays were placed in union. Regardless, this mystery makes the play all the more enticing. I enjoyed *Blue Heart* mightily and will hopefully be returning to the wonderful Orange Tree Theatre in the future.