

WOMEN LAUGHING – REVIEWS

The British Theatre Guide

There's a certain kind of silence. That one where you've said everything you can possibly think to say, and so has the other person you're supposed to be talking to. It's awkward and panicked, then you hear a terrible sound: the sound of someone else having fun. It's that much worse when it's two husbands failing to talk and the sound is their wives' high-pitched laughter.

Women Laughing is about how the heck are we meant to just get along with all this neurosis getting in the way. So it's not a totally fun ride: it starts out with a back-stiffeningly awkward conversation between two husbands who have no idea what to say but are going to spend the afternoon together as a social call.

Things become less polite but no less strained when they are joined in the garden by the wives who had been laughing in the background. And what were they laughing about? The fact that both men are in therapy! Badum bum tish.

This sounds all grey and miserable, a depression fest, but actually the night bounces along. Mark Rose and Mark Sands are excellent, Rose alight with barely contained rage and Sands full of prim shyness and self-denial. In fact, the whole cast is incredible, with fantastic chemistry. Mark Rose and Sally Grey in particular seem genuinely in love, a rare thing to see on stage.

Michael Wall's text manages to nail how downright funny awkward conversations are, while pulling off the difficult balance of laughing at its characters without being cruel to them. So while there's some tough questioning going on here, a stripping away of what lies behind social niceties, it's never trite, never dull.

The second half, added for stage, is less tight than the first, but allows for some meaty development of what had been shown before. While the first half is about an afternoon tea in Ealing, the second is set in a mental hospital. It's a denser, tense atmosphere, with fewer laughs and more depth. It drags a bit, with some scenes feeling unneeded, but it gives a needed reality to what was implied before.

Women Laughing is bold, brash and subtle with an electric cast and a hilarious and desperate script. This stunning production by the Blueprint Theatre Company will make you laugh and think about why you're laughing. Very much recommended.

Islington Gazette *****

Women Laughing, written for radio in 1989 by the late Michael Wall and now running at the Old Red Lion, has a simple premise. Told in two acts, it features two couples and chronicles the descent into mental illness.

The period is late-1980s Thatcherite Britain – a country in thrall to financial prosperity and betterment, but also in panic over AIDS and the uncertainties of the era. The two men, unbeknownst to either of them initially, as they sit in the garden over a refreshing beer, share the ignominy of attending psychotherapy.

As this shared background comes to light, an ominous and confrontational air hangs over proceedings. The second act will find them in a very different garden.

The tension is perfectly measured and the play crackles with a nervous, edgy atmosphere. Even with the dated backdrop, the story itself is timeless, displaying both a dark comedic heart and a subtle profundity.

All four members of the cast are fantastic, imbuing their characters with emotional depth and complexity. Occasionally some of the vocal ticks make for uncomfortable watching, but maybe that's the point. In any event, such a complaint does not detract from the play's overall power.

The script is pin sharp and the performances have an offbeat charm that is strikingly effective. This is for those who like their humour bleak but their stories with a compassionate heart. It is a wonderful production and deserves to be seen.

WhatsOnStage ****

Michael Wall's 1992 play *Women Laughing* is a dark, engaging and at times hilarious exploration of both mental illness and the futility of suburban life. Safely rooted in that most British world of 'awkward turtle' situational comedy, the talented Blueprint Theatre Company provide a detailed and thoughtful take on a play that is a peculiar mix of comfortable audial theatre and surprisingly uncomfortable physical performance.

Originally a one-act radio play, *Women Laughing* follows the journey of two suburban couples as they gently dance around the subject of psychological therapy. Wall's strength as a writer is certainly his wordplay, with almost Joycean monologues interwoven with wonderful one-liners: "I hate it when I disuse a word", "that AIDS advert on the telly".

This is where the production flies, and Mark Rose is electrifying as Colin. Seamlessly moving from moustache-twitching irritant to open-hearted lost boy, he leads the audience through a manic first half in which Colin's and Tony's troubles are delicately explored through the broadest and most generic of topics: women, work, holidays, wine, and roads – among others equally banal and uniformly amusing.

It is this emphasis on the spoken word, however, that belies the show's radio heritage and sets up an uncomfortable marriage with the evidently purpose-built theatrical second act. Tony's complete mental breakdown and certification, alongside Colin's unspecified sectioning move the action from comfortable bourgeois gathering to a full scale "lunatic" context.

This is certainly disarming, but feels more unbalanced than justified as suddenly the focus shifts to the physical performance of the actors rather than the strength of the whirlwind text. This serves more to highlight the deficiencies of the first act (with little attention paid by the author to the physicality of the characters) than to shock the audience with a genuine character progression. For Tony especially the leap is too far for us to believably make.

That said one excellent trick of Wall's is to avoid naming Colin's affliction. We naturally apply meaning to every paranoiac inflection in a vain (and of course entirely pointless) attempt to compartmentalise his mental illness.

Sally Grey's performance as Stephanie is beautifully nuanced, particularly in the second act, and the ensemble performances are of an excellent and highly engaging nature. Furthermore the set and costume are wonderfully simple and evocative, calling to mind the spectre of the never-ending pastel bungalows in *Edward Scissorhands*. It is the jarring metre of the script, however, that preclude this production from really lifting off.

One Stop Arts ****

Women Laughing was originally written in 1989 as a one-act radio play. A second act was then added for the stage version, which was first produced in 1992, shortly after the author Michael Wall's tragic death from a brain tumor at the age of 44. Given that it's the 20th anniversary of the piece, manifestly dated in the mid-80s, Blueprint Theatre, which strives to define each era in its productions, has nobly delivered under the direction of Teunkie van der Sluijs.

Wall's naturalistic writing style gives each of his well-rounded characters sufficient depth to be able to empathise with them on one level or another. At times, Wall gives us dry humour reminiscent of an Alan Ayckbourn comedy, and in others short bursts of lyrical language à la Jim Cartwright. As the dialogue progresses, it's not difficult to comprehend the thought processes underlying each scene as it's played out. These are ordinary people going about their mundane existence and, just like in real life, the play is peppered with highs and lows, laughter and tears, stubbornness and compromise. But more than that, it's also a disturbing study of the descent into madness of two maladjusted men, each of them having been somehow driven to psychiatric therapy and eventual incarceration in a mental institution.

The opening scene is intentionally awkward and bears all the signs of male bravado coupled with the attempt to acquiesce. Colin, the host, is relaxed and Tony, the guest, is uptight. They sit in relative silence in the suburban garden enjoying a quiet beer. The only sounds to be heard are the birds tweeting, the odd bit of traffic and the sporadic laughter of their respective wives (preparing food in the kitchen offstage). Their uneasiness is diverted and the smalltalk begins... Stock conversation about business, cars, drink and women. Tony's anal demeanour occasionally slips as he attempts to be more laddish, on a par with Colin. As Tony leaves for the bathroom, the arrival of wives Stephanie and Maddy giggling like schoolgirls ends in the reveal that they have been laughing over the fact that both men are in therapy all along.

Thereon in, tempers begin to fray and the men become quite fractious, while the women take it all in their stride. In a moment of pure black comedy, after Tony has revealed that the reason he's seeing a psychiatrist is that he wants to kill his wife with his bare hands, Maddy calmly remarks "That's just the way he is". The wives return to the kitchen to clean up and the men resume their inane conversation about cricket.

Act II is set in another garden but this time it's the grounds of the asylum to which Colin and Tony have been admitted. The devastating effects of his schizophrenia medication has taken its toll on Tony who is semi-catatonic, occasionally bursting into a fit of laughter or crying in sympathy with Colin, whose manic depression frequently takes hold. The wives do their best to fulfil their obligations and despite all of the difficult challenges, their love for each other overrides the temptation to throw in the towel.

This brilliant cast manage to draw out every relevant emotion from the script and never resort to caricature. Mark Rose is particularly outstanding as Colin; energetic, stimulating and vivacious... eloquent and enthralling. His real life wife, Sally Grey, plays Stephanie. She displays a soporific quality that is so impassive and yet one could see the sorrow behind the eyes, the resignation that duty comes before honour. Mark Sands, as Tony, creates a heartbreaking persona of a man on the edge, living with a condition which has crippled him internally and stripped him of his dignity. Holly Clark as his wife Maddy, ironically the sanest

of the lot but only because of her ignorance and stupidity, conveyed a blissful sense of optimism, even towards the end when the reality of it all hit home.

In the closing moments, a sweet sense of unity affirmed that even through the darkest moments, there are glimpses of sunshine to lift our spirits.

The Public Reviews ****

It is the mark of a really talented writer when a difficult subject such as mental illness can be made to be not just entertaining, but downright funny. That is not to suggest that the topic is made light of – far from it – as Michael Wall's skillful script cleverly draws both the light and dark from this otherwise taboo subject. Set in the 1980s, the play revolves around two couples who spend an afternoon together eating, drinking and talking in an Ealing garden. Colin and Stephanie are hosting Tony and Maddy, and the seemingly amiable festivities soon take a sinister turn as both men are revealed to be in therapy with troubling thoughts that threaten to overwhelm them.

The opening scene, played primarily between Mark Rose's Colin and Mark Sands' Tony, is a delightfully awkward exchange between the two husbands who make small talk as the sound of their wives' laughter occasionally spills through from offstage. The men use casual sexism and xenophobia, often making references to the women and making generalised statements about 'them'. Rose is superb as Colin: highly-strung and irascible but still likeable and sympathetic. Sands is entirely the 80s tabloid reading NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), at first seeming terribly nice but revealed to be masking some worrying views and impulses.

First written as a one-act radio play, the second act of *Women Laughing* was added for the stage version, and shows an interesting role reversal with the male characters appearing uninhibited and the female characters echoing their earlier awkwardness. 'Them' now refers to the men, who are spoken about rather than to and frequently patronised or condescended to, and Colin's fidgety behaviour rises to new levels of mania with deep mood swings to depression. Tony is borderline catatonic, but Sands' unspoken reactions are beautifully observed and the change in him deeply affecting. Brilliantly written, well-acted, and thoughtfully staged; this is a gem of a play that Blue Print Theatre have done well to bring back to the fore.