

A play for today...or maybe yesterday!

Director Shaun Chambers gives an insight into Abigail's Party

Like the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *My Night With Reg*, Abigail's Party is one of those plays in which we don't get to meet the title character. Abigail's party is taking place at the time of the play but her party is not our focus. Instead we focus on Beverly's party to which she invites Angela and Tony, who are new to the street and Susan, Abigail's mum.

The play written in 1977 is very much of its time and Laurence and Beverly represent the emerging lower middle class. Although Laurence and Beverly live on the same street as Angela and Tony they feel they are better than them due to their cultural experience and possessions. This was a time when a bowl of olives was seen as exotic and the difference between a real leather three piece suite and a 'leather look' three piece suite really mattered.

In many ways Beverly and Laurence are the couple from hell; Beverly forcing her guests to partake in things that they don't want to whilst Laurence forces his interest in high culture such as artwork, literature and classical music. The couple create a two-pronged attack on their guests. Renowned playwright, Alan Bennett commented that even he would run a mile from all of the characters in the play and his only puzzle about Beverly was that she had escaped strangulation for so long!

The play takes place in real time in the same location throughout and this limited sense of time and place really adds to the stress and intensity of Beverly's soiree. As the night progresses and the drinks and insults flow the living room becomes a pressure cooker. This is not a sitcom nor an extended comic sketch, indeed it is more akin to a Greek tragedy with its structure of tension, acceleration and climax.

The play came to prominence and indeed achieved iconic status when it was transmitted by the BBC as a *Play for Today* in November 1977 with Alison Steadman playing the monstrous Beverly. This televised version featured the iconic song, *Forever and Ever* by Greek songster Demis Roussos however this was not Mike Leigh's original intention as the stage play featured a cover version of the song *Light My Fire* by the blind Puerto Rican singer-songwriter, José Feliciano. This change came about because of copyright reasons as Leigh had to ensure that the music used in the televised version was from artists recorded on British record labels just in case the BBC sold the play to the USA. As José Feliciano became Demis Roussos, so Elvis Presley gave way to Tom Jones. Even the opening version of Donna Summer's disco classic, *Love to Love You Baby* was sung by Clare Torry (known for singing the theme to the BBC TV series *Butterflies*) and not Donna Summer. In addition to Summer being signed to American label, the BBC banned the use of her version because it contained 'orgasmic moans'. We have restored the music in this production to the original intentions of Mike Leigh – apologies to any Demis Roussos fans!

So sit back and enjoy the party from hell, I hope it brings back some memories.



NORTHERN COMEDY THEATRE