

Our Day Out by Willy Russell
The Courtyard Theatre, Chipstead

The jolly cartoon on the programme and posters had me settling into my seat expecting games of conkers and lashings of rice pudding. The name 'Willy Russell' that accompanied the bustling school bus and cheerful faces should have been my clue to change my expectations. Then the curtains parted and the stage was peppered with lots of little ones, familiar faces and new, and I relaxed into what I imagined would be familiar fare.

However, early on Mr Briggs and the head teacher talk about the demise of the last teacher who went on a trip with this class and the dark throwaway lines startled me into sudden giggles. This was going to be something else. The Thursday night audience found themselves laughing... a lot.

This play was so cleverly cast. The teachers played by Oliver Horle and Asher Byrne seemed to tower over their charges, giving us the illusion that they were truly adults. Phoebe de Azevedo as Miss Duncan exuded calm stillness, and Lola Rush Miller as the head mistress was poised and prissy and reminded me of the deputy head mistress at my secondary school. Oliver was the horrible



teacher you didn't want coming on a school trip, so shouty and aggressive, nothing like Oliver in real life (well, not that I've seen at least), a really meaty part to get into. On the other hand Asher portrayed Mr Barker as a bag of nerves who was stifled by awkwardness. The kind of teacher you wouldn't mind on your school trip, as long as nothing unexpected happens. Asher was in a scene played up the staircase, which I've done before, and the audience can't decide if they'll crane and watch you or just listen. I craned and watched and Asher's reaction to a fright near some ruins was a perfect cartoon caricature that had me laughing my head off.



In complete contrast to that was Georgina Perry's performance as Mrs Kay, exasperated by the treatment her class get by the school and her concern for their future, she was world weary yet defiant. It actually took me a while to recognise her and it brought home to me that we had been away from the theatre for a long time. Sure, the people behind the bar look just the same, but these kids – they change so fast. Think of Bradley Adams. When Our Day Out was originally scheduled to run he was going to play Mr Briggs, but time marches on, and while I can picture him on stage, in a suit, he's making a fine home for himself in the director's chair.



Charlie McCarthy exudes confidence on the stage. Lots of people in the bar afterwards were commenting on his performance as the coach driver, how he was never 'off,' maintaining his character, as were all the cast in fairness. But it was when he had to grip the attention of a packed house while alone on stage, with no one to engage with apart from a stuffed alligator, that his comic timing and physicality were a joy to behold.



This coach load of kids, it so reminded me of the rough secondary school I went to. The bad boys turfing out the innocents from the back of the coach, then getting ejected from the back seats by a stern teacher, cor, it's like it was yesterday. The interlopers Reilly, played by Louis Higham, and Digga, played by Ronan O'Leary were right out of Grange Hill. Their cheeky, lairy way with the teachers was so authentic I wonder if they live in detention in real life! I hope we see more of them in future productions.



Ellis Russell as Milton articulated his lines very well. Certain older members of our audience really appreciate it when our youth members can clearly project, and it shows thoughtfulness on his part. The same can be said for newcomer Alice Grant. She really got stuck in to her role as the shopkeeper, may this be the first of many. And speaking of shopkeepers, Jack Randall looked like he was having a whale of a time, especially delivering his fruity final line with relish "The thieving ...!" I seem to recall him enjoying similar hijinks in Goodnight Mr Tom, so it won't be long until we see him in Older Youth productions I'm sure.

The part of Tiffany Andrews was a more complex character. Ela McCarthy played her with subtle strength. She wants to hang with the bad boys, she's tough and strong. Or is she putting up a front, hiding her vulnerability behind a cloud of cigarette smoke?



Comic relief came from Amyrah Williams and Lily Osbond as Britney and Chantelle, relentlessly pursuing their crush: the 'out of his depth' Mr Barker. Millicent Champion as the waitress trying desperately to get rid of customers worked well in her other role as Harmony Miller, the sister of Destiny Millar (Alice Grant again). The doubling really worked well in this play, especially for these two 'sisters'. Theo McCarthy really got stuck into his character Ashley and had lots to get his

teeth into. Ava McCarthy really held her ground as the youngest cast member, which shouldn't surprise us as this is her fourth outing on our stage, so she's an old hand at this acting lark.

I think it's the character of Carol Chandler that became the focal point of the play as we got into the second act. Holly De Quintal played her so well. The themes that Willy Russell wants to explore can be personified in Carol, a member of the 'Progress' class that Mr Briggs has written off. Holly revealed by her quiet reluctance to engage with the 'Day Out' that there would be more serious problems awaiting her when she got home. Holly portrayed Carol so well that you dread that it's Mr Briggs who finds her on the edge, surely he'll only make matters worse with his shortness and impatience. How much does this girl not want to go home?



It shows such skill from all involved that a play with such contrasting characters and situations can mesh together so effectively. And rather than end with laughter and mischief, it bravely ends with wincing and darkness. But at least there's one thing we're delighted about, and that's that we can tell Carol's mum exactly where she's been: having a fantastic day out!



Michael Rahman, April 2022