

BLUE REMEMBERED HILLS

by Dennis Potter

Highbury Players, directed by Phil Astle

Highbury Theatre, Thursday 14 March 2024

“Blue Remembered Hills” began life as a TV play back in the late 1970s, although I believe you may have to be of a certain age to recall the “Play for Today” strand that was popular at the time, the best remembered probably being a production of “Abigail’s Party” which funnily enough has also been recently staged at Highbury.

It’s small screen origins will account for the short running time of the piece, coming in at not much above 70 minutes although this was somewhat extended from the original script.

We open with a large screen in front of the main stage with a protruding platform reaching out to where the front two rows of the audience would normally be. I am wondering if I was the only one who thought the whole show was to be performed on that small space. Luckily, I was wrong.

We begin with some period songs, excellently performed by Louise Grifferty, accompanied by reknowned local keyboard player John Barber, which set the tone for what was to come.

We then moved to a pre-filmed insert on aforementioned screen, with what these days would be the equivalent of a DVD extra, showing the match striking tendencies of Donald, and his suffering at the hands of his abusive mother, the later played by Gill Williams who took no part in the “live action”. This segment was written by play director Phil Astle and was a powerful way to get things started.

There was an effective use of searchlights to establish the wartime setting and then the screen was removed to allow the full use of the stage. There was also a good use of lighting effects to depict the fire towards the end of the play.

There were a couple of trees on the set to establish the forest setting, with various back projections used to indicate we were in different parts of said forest. Three boxes on stage were also put to good use throughout the show.

The central concept of this show is that the 7 year old characters are all played by adults and it is down to the cast to ensure that the speech patterns and mannerisms of the characters allows for the audience to buy into this, despite the age range of the actors. (And far be it from me to speculate on the details of said age gaps!)

For the most part this worked. I wasn’t certain about all the shuffling about that the characters seem to do but maybe this was because it’s not what adults would do and let’s face it, 7 year olds probably don’t stand or sit still that much.

The costumes certainly gave the suggestion of the period. All the boys seemed to be uniformly in shirts, tank tops and shorts, suggesting that maybe they have come here straight from school, with the main additions being Raymond’s cowboy hat and Donald’s deerstalker and scarf.

The girls on the other hand were very different. Angela, the housewife in waiting with her bright yellow dress and constantly pushing of a doll in a pram contrasting with Audrey's tomboyish appearance in dungarees.

The cast certainly gave it their all in this show and although it is relatively short it involves expending a lot of energy and I expect they were all exhausted following all the running about that they were doing.

There was an excellent performance from Alan Groucott in the role of Donald, having to give a range of emotions as the boy pining for his missing in action dad and suffering at the hands of a bullying mother and the other children. It was difficult not to have sympathy for an ultimately tragic character,

Richard Constable as John barely kept still for the duration of the show and very much came across as a wound-up Tigger and someone who these days we'd probably describe as hyperactive. Ken Agnew as Raymond had a lot of humour to play with his stutter and cowboy outfit.

Simon Baker's Peter had elements of Dick Emery's Bover Boy for those of you (us!) old enough to remember that character and had a lot of good interactions with Jake Collyer as Willie. There was clearly a believable history between these two.

Lizzy Small was suitably "girly" as Angela but Alex Hunter perhaps came across as a bit too mature for someone meant to be 7 – solid performance but she seemed to be playing older.

Mention here too for flautist Emma Francis, who appeared to be dressed as some sort of wood-nymph and whose role seemed to be to bridge the gaps between scenes and indeed to further extend the running time! And to be fair, she did this very well.

Overall, an enjoyable experience. This is a show that strongly requires a willing suspension of disbelief from the audience and it has to be said this was achieved. Tightly plotted, tightly acted and lots of energy throughout the performance.