

REVIEW by Melanie Newman

Neighbourhood Watch, by Alan Ayckbourn

Streatham Theatre Company www.streathamtheatre.org.uk

Mark Bennett Streatham Centre, Streatham Tate Library, SW16 1PN

11 and 12 July 2014, as part of the Streatham Festival www.streathamfestival.com

Alan Ayckbourn's 75th play, *Neighbourhood Watch*, follows Hilda and Martin - a Christian brother and sister – as their increasing paranoia turns peaceful Bluebell Hill into a fortress and precipitates a total breakdown of law and order.

'Practising pacifist' Martin (a perfectly cast Chris Phipps) and his prudish, possessive sister set up a neighbourhood watch group, encouraged and assisted by rabid ex-security guard Rod (Nigel Haynes, pulsating with self-righteous rage). Drippy Gareth, seething over wife Amy's latest affair, and town gossip Dorothy lend additional support.

While Martin clashes early on with Luther, his thuggish next-door-neighbour, Hilda manages to co-opt Luther's cowed young wife Magda by eliciting an admission that her husband beats her.

As time goes by Martin and the various sub-committees over which he presides circle Bluebell Hill with an 8ft high chain-link fence, issue residents (over the age of 3) with ID cards and floods the place with 'supplementary light' at night.

There's even a set of stocks, erected on an 'ornamental roundabout', which provides one of the play's priceless moments.

The apertures in Gareth's design are too large, someone complains: 'These anorexic teenage girls just slip out and walk away'.

Gareth explains that the pillories were meant for the 'mature woman', going on to discuss, with the increasingly censorious Hilda, plans for tarring and feathering his errant wife.

Before long events, and in particular the violent local family introduced to the group by Rod, are spiralling even further out of control: death and destruction follows.

Neighbourhood Watch was chosen by the Streatham Theatre Company to fit with the theme of the 2014 Streatham Festival: 'the streets of my imagination'.

Despite the universal acclaim that greeted the play's opening in 2011, it is not the sharpest of social satires. As a dig at Daily Mail-reading, pleb-hating Little Britain and the Tories' now-forgotten 'Big Society' concept it was pipped to the post – and arguably outclassed - by 2007's cinematic success *Hot Fuzz*.

The script's tone lurches awkwardly at times between farce and weightier emotional such as in the revelation of Magda's abuse, played in Jo Ostrowska's production to heart-rending effect by Tracy Whitehead.

And the confidence of Katerina Clarke's portrayal of the foul-mouthed, booze-swilling Amy highlights the play's underlying conservatism when it comes to its female characters: we are meant to believe that Amy, having effortlessly seduced the unprepossessing Martin and rubbed his sister's nose in the fact, does not spit out what's left of him and move swiftly on but falls deeply in love.

Even this *volte-face* is not enough to redeem her, however: she loses out in the end to the ghastly Hilda, who is rewarded with that male fantasy staple - a lesbian love affair - with the damaged Magda.

But that's not to say there aren't plenty of laughs and entertainment to be had from this tale of do-gooders gone bad, played by a strong amateur cast.