

# Theatre review: A Taste of Honey, Lyceum Theatre (\*\*\*\*)



*A Taste of Honey* by 18-year-old Shelagh Delaney first burst onto the stage of the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in May 1958, where its brave, unsentimental depiction of working-class life – complete with single motherhood, teenage pregnancy, interracial relationships and unapologetic homosexuality – shocked and excited in equal measure.

More than 50 years on, the play has lost none of its relevance. Yes, it feels very much of its time, but although we might like to congratulate ourselves on our more liberal values today, the play's themes of poverty and prejudice – especially as brought vividly to life in the Lyceum's scorching new production – still ring frighteningly true.

Most memorable is the sheer messy energy of Delaney's seething creation. There are inconsistencies, and characters appear and disappear without much explanation, but it all adds to the dirty realism that the writer so compellingly conveys. And it's an intensity and power that Tony Cownie's urgent yet lyrical Lyceum production ably delivers, while still retaining a level-headed clarity as it works through the play's tough themes.





Lucy Black and Rebecca Ryan shine as the central mother and daughter Helen and Jo, both searching for love yet seemingly resigned to loneliness. Both actors are superbly alive to the working-class Salford dialect, in crisp performances pitched somewhere between warm affection and ferocious contempt. As a damaged yet determined Jo, Ryan shows that in rebelling against her single-minded mother, she only becomes more like her.

Keith Fleming may be a little broad as the drunken, lustful Peter, Helen's short-term fancy man, but he brings a unsettling dark edge to the character's sometimes humorous antics. Adrian Decosta is all wide-eyed charm as Jo's (even more short-term) boyfriend, and Charlie Ryan tugs the heartstrings (yet steers clear of camp stereotypes) as the good-hearted Geoffrey, grateful for a welcome from Jo when his landlord throws him onto the street, yet cast aside when he's no longer useful.

Janet Bird's elegant revolving set allows smooth transitions from scene to scene, but its cold, steel backdrop suggests that the characters are imprisoned in their respective fates. However, the play's seemingly bleak conclusion – played with gripping desperation by Ryan – seems to hint that no matter how broken it is, life will go on.

**[A Taste of Honey](#) continues at the [Lyceum Theatre](#) until 9 February**