

Review – Agatha Christie's Love From A Stranger ***

Neither Lucy Bailey's taut direction or Mike Britton's ingenious and brooding lateral-shifting set designs, lit with viscous blood-red menace by Oliver Fenwick, can gainsay the inarguable axiom that you can not put lipstick on a pig.

A promised journey in to the heart of psychotic darkness and 'grizzly claustrophobic' suspense that cannot quite deliver.

A fundamental reason being, and evidenced by the paucity of this play's performance since the 1930s, is that it is just not that good, whatever Frank Vosper's polishing and tightening-up provided.



A period novelty certainly, a contemporaneous study of female 'gaslighter' victim revenger's tragedy possibly.

Most certainly the valiant performance from stage dominant Helen Bradbury, as giddy, gauche ingenue, Cecily Harrington, suffocating in stagnant, emotional ennui lends the production

vital cohesion. She utterly falls for Sam Frenchum's Walter Mitty meets stock-character nut-job, Bruce Lovell. Debonaire cosmopolitan charmer, he soon turns out to be a proper wrong 'un personified. Even then, appearances can be deceptive. What is certain is that it is all going to end in tears – and other suspicious fluids.

Potential red-herring plot decoys lurk in Bruce's lurid photographic darkroom, his obsessive notebook listings – not least his rogue elephant-in-the-lounge collection of specialist reading materials on acquitted serial-murderers.

Time to wake up and smell the coffee Cecily.

Oops! Incrementally, she begins to have her suspicions about Bruce's increasingly erratic and fractious moods. To everyone else there is an urgent sense of wanting to shout out – 'He's behind you!' And what of that exotic silken shawl? Earlier on did we not see Bruce caressing Cecily's scarf? Might not the play's enigmatic title be a nuanced Agatha Christie tease? Add the letter 'l' to stranger and we have *strangler*. Just a thought come the climax, quite literally so as Cecily and Bruce's bodies become antagonistically entangled in erotic frisson, with deadly effect.

Best just relish the malice aforethought and surrender to zeitgeist crystal-chimed Home-Counties clipped diction. Along with allowing Richard Hammarton's sound design/compositions to rasp and insinuate like frantic wasps rattling inside the gardener's potting-shed window – where there just might be another empty bottle of peroxide. Surely Bruce's hair can not be greying that much?

Distracting, untaxing – the dénouement reveal is something to die for.