

Life & Times Theatre

A Taste of Honey

Trafalgar Studios, London, 10 December
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I'M NOT HAPPY AND I'M NOT SAD

*'I'm not frightened of the darkness outside.
It's the darkness inside houses I don't like.'*

The above is a line from the play I have always found most touching and revealing because it betrays the emotional neglect of a daughter, as covered up by the sharp retorts and clipped, blackly comic wisecracks of both mother and daughter — the two main protagonists in the play *A Taste of Honey*.

A vigorous new production has opened at the Trafalgar Studios in London. Directed by Bijan Sheibani, the play once said to have changed British theatre has the talented performer and singer Jodie Prenger in its lead role as Helen, a ballsy, unsympathetic, selfish, calculating woman, never without a drink in her hand. For its time, portraying a woman, mean on her own terms, was something of a revelation.

Shelagh Delaney, born in 1938 in Salford, Lancashire, wrote the play (her debut) in 1958, when she was just 19. Apparently written in 10 days, as a response to seeing Terence Rattigan's *Variation on a Theme* at the Opera House, Manchester, during its pre-West End tour, Delaney was of the opinion that the play showed 'insensitivity in the way Rattigan portrayed homosexuals'.

Delaney wanted to show the working class in a more authentic, less patronising way. She hated: '... plays where the factory

workers came cap in hand and call the boss "sir". Usually North Country people are shown as gormless, whereas in actual fact, they are very alive and cynical.'

Kitchen sink drama developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and had characters described as 'angry young men' disillusioned with their lot (the popular soap *Coronation Street* being the natural successor of the genre). The working class were depicted living in cramped and grotty housing (often sat at the kitchen table in their vest or nightwear, smoking, drinking tea, perhaps cleaning their shoes on newspaper), and managing to survive boring jobs and early marriages, in order to let loose at the weekend with alcohol and forbidden, extramarital sex.

Delaney's play (made into a film in 1961 and worth a watch) focuses on a schoolgirl, Jo (played convincingly by Gemma Dobson), who has a brief fling with a black sailor, (shocking for the time), becomes pregnant (again, for the time, scandalous), and then moves in with a gay, somewhat camp male friend (played by Stuart Thompson very well and with sensitivity). The themes of class, race, gender, and sexuality are thus covered but in an unforced way and according to the codes of the day. The male characters have smaller roles and are attendant on the female leads. Jo has a seemingly-monstrous mother: she has scant maternal instinct and is blowsy, hardened, bitter, yet very shrewd, while her spiky, angry daughter Jo appears, sadly, to be doomed to copying her mother's toxic example. Both characters are emotionally malnourished (displaying the vicious circle of neglectful parenting) and, although appearing to barely tolerate each other, yearn to be closer, but are lacking the skills. Jo wants a real mother; one who



Gemma Dobson (Jo), Tom Varey (Peter), and Jodie Prenger (Helen). Photo credit Marc Brenner.

cares for her, not one who runs off with any abusive, silver-tongued 'fancy man' at the drop of a hat. Both women do what they can in their limited circumstances to escape, to find love, lust, or a port in a storm. The twisted mother-daughter relationship is well illustrated and the dialogue as snappy and acerbic as intended, with tragedy and loneliness lying just beneath the surface.

In 1986, The Smiths' lead singer and lyricist Morrissey said, 'I've never made any secret of the fact that at least 50 per cent of my reason for writing can be blamed on Shelagh Delaney.' The lyrics of 'This Night Has Opened My Eyes' (a mournful, beautiful song), for example, recites in part the plot of *A Taste of Honey*, using the quotes 'The dream has gone but the baby is real', as well as 'river the colour of lead', and, 'I'm not happy and I'm not sad'.

A play with this much myth behind it could possibly be a let-down on viewing but instead it feels fresh and contemporary without losing any of the style and texture of the 1960s. This is a play where you can almost smell the poverty — the cheap furnishings, greasy kitchenette, and soured milk, a play seeping with hopelessness, but sparkling with humour too.

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Gemma Dobson (Jo) and Stuart Thompson (Geoffrey). Photo credit Marc Brenner.

