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[Hatches, Matches and Dispatches](#)

March 29, 2017 | By [Hugh Simpson](#) |

★★★★☆ **Beautiful timing**

Saughtonhall United Reformed Church: *Tues 28 Mar – Sat 1 Apr 2017*

Review by Hugh Simpson

There is genuine warmth in Saughtonhall Drama Group's *Hatches, Matches and Dispatches*, adding to a real drive and considerable understanding of comedy.

Written by the late Alan Cochrane, a stalwart of Edinburgh People's Theatre, the piece is a sequel to his *Ne'er The Twain* (which Saughtonhall presented in last year's Fringe) and is probably an even better play.



Betty Meston, Chris Mitchell and Morag Simpson. Photo: Sarah Howley

The earlier work deals with rivalry between Leith residents the McIvors and the Burns family from a few yards up the road in Edinburgh, when the two burghs were about to merge in the 1920s.

The sequel – about the funeral of Nellie McIvor, and various inter-family squabbles – adds to this a strain of urban Scottish magic realism, with supernatural elements mixed into a variety-derived comedy tradition.

It is also a beautifully constructed piece, with the way characters come and go from the one-room set in order to create different combinations, without it ever seeming contrived, something of a masterclass.

This mastery of the situation is carried over into the way that events that take place offstage seem immediate when described, and the characters apparently in the next room who never appear seem just as real as those who eventually do. Situations and personalities established in *Ne'er The Twain* are economically underlined without labouring the point; ignorance of the earlier work is no barrier to understanding.

carefully established characters

Of course, this still needs a sympathetic cast to carry it off – which is thankfully what we get here. This is particularly important, as much of the humour comes from carefully established characters as much as funny remarks.



Scott Kerr and Betty Meston. Photo: Sarah Howley

There are lines that seem innocuous in themselves but are delivered here with such awareness and timing that they bring the house down – it is rare indeed to see someone get a spontaneous round of applause just for delivering a pay-off, as happened to Scott Kerr at one point on the first night.

There was also one notable moment where cast members visibly struggled to restrain their own reactions to some of the humour, and a couple of other occasions where lines were not yet secure, but both of these are entirely understandable and soon pass.

Better instead to focus on the way that Morag Simpson's direction creates a seemingly effortless flow and a genuine ensemble feel; she also puts in a sterling performance as Mrs Bell, the granny who turns on a sixpence from a figure of fun to one of immense sympathy. The aforementioned Kerr as Bob McIvor and Betty Meston as his wife Jean may evoke the Broons in ways other than his beautifully luxuriant moustache; his indignant self-importance and her long-suffering frustration do not entirely mask a genuine warmth.

Chris Mitchell and Colin Mitchell, as the snootier Edinburgh residents Mr and Mrs Burns, are an excellent foil to the McIvors, with Chris Mitchell in particular stretching out the word 'Leith' disdainfully like a trainee Lady Bracknell; once again, however, they convey the essential humanity behind what could be stock characters.

spiteful brio

Murray Petrie's gallus bookie's runner Wullie Lomax is much more of a caricature, but is discharged with such elongated energy that it hardly matters. Judith Petrie gives a spiteful brio to Bob and Nellie's sister Teenie.



Morag Simpson, Betty Meston, Murray Petrie, Scott Kerr and Ishbel Shand. Photo: Sarah Howley

The McIvor's daughter Carol seems to be the only sane one around, which might make the role somewhat boring, but Louise Starkey makes her thoroughly believable; her fiancée Robin Burns could be an insufferable drip, but Simon Petrie gives him sufficient life.

It is Nellie McIvor who holds the play together (strange as it may seem, considering it is set at her wake) and Ishbel Shand sets the tone from the beginning, whether smiling beatifically or planning some kind of mischief.

Jim Pryde's sturdy set is just right, and technically the production is of a high standard. Edith Allan's costumes deserve a special mention – it is a long time after we are told about Teenie's inappropriate funeral garb that we see it, and it is spot on – not ludicrous or pantomimish, just wrong.

Some knowledge of Scots vernacular may add to the enjoyment, but is certainly not necessary to appreciate what is a very funny and thoroughly enjoyable production.

Running time 2 hours including one interval

Saughtonhall United Reformed Church, 87 Saughtonhall Drive, EH12 5TR

Tuesday 28 March– Saturday 1 April 2017

Tues – Fri evenings 7.30 pm, Matinee Sat at 2.30 pm

Tickets: <http://www.saughtonhall.com/page32.html>

Saughtonhall Drama Group on Facebook: [saughtonhalldramagroup](https://www.facebook.com/saughtonhalldramagroup)

Website: <http://www.saughtonhall.com/dramagroup.html>

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