Suddenly at Home – Review

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✭✭✭✩✩ Subtle thrills

Bethany Laing (Ruth) and Louise Starkey (Maggie). Photo © Sarah Howley

Saughtonhall Church Hall
Wed 26 – Sat 29 March 2014
Review by Hugh Simpson

There are some excellent performances and a great deal to applaud in Saughtonhall Drama Group’s production of Francis Durbridge’s thriller Suddenly At Home; even if the end result is enjoyable rather than truly gripping, it still makes for a highly pleasurable evening.

This is far from being a conventional whodunnit. We know very early on that Glenn Howard plans to murder his wife Maggie – partly for her money, partly to avoid moving to Bermuda – and pin the blame on her old boyfriend Sam. The intrigue comes mainly from his attempts to evade justice, and from a series of twists and turns often signalled by other characters’ entrances and exits and a string of phone calls.

This can give the narrative an almost farcical atmosphere at times, and the lack of motivation for some of the characters’ actions mean that this is not a play that will ever win any prizes for profundity. But it is tightly structured, with a series of almost cliffhanger moments that should come as no surprise from the writer of Paul Temple, and the Saughtonhall Drama Group make a decent fist of it.

All of those comings, goings and ringing phones provide ample opportunities for things to go wrong, but it is to director Morag Simpson’s immense credit that this never seems likely to happen. There is more in the way of reliance on the prompter than should be necessary, but on the whole the atmosphere and pace are pretty consistent. Certainly the audience are entirely absorbed by the action.

There is an easy and impressive naturalism to many of the performances that helps to compensate for some of the less believable parts of the storyline. The first scene, featuring Maggie and her sister Helen gossiping, immediately creates the atmosphere, with the sisters’ comfortable rapport effortlessly evoked. Louise Starkey’s Maggie is instantly sympathetic while still containing hints of
how she could be infuriating, while Chris Mitchell (Helen) is outstanding, creating a completely realistic character through the smallest gestures and vocal nuances.

Eleanor Watson struggles initially as Maggie’s friend (or is she?) Sheila, but becomes steadily more convincing at conveying the more conflicted and volcanic elements of the role. Gavin Watson resists the temptation to overplay the role of the novelist Sam, instead opting for an understated performance that successfully adds some pathos to the proceedings. Colin Mitchell’s Inspector Appleton is another carefully played performance, creating a very clever and necessary counterpoint to John Webster’s more poised and commanding Superintendent Remick. Bethany Laing’s maid Ruth is another controlled and apt characterisation.

“an extremely subtle performance”

This tastefulness is thankfully extended to the set. The 70s setting could have been an invitation to run riot with garish colours and produce a retro-camp room that never could have existed at the time; instead the period is evoked subtly by Jim Pryde’s set.

The furniture is largely timeless, but that all-important telephone is one of the 700 series, there is a piece of string art on the wall, and at one point Glenn thumps his fist on the bookcase, disturbing a Newton’s Cradle. Edith Allan’s costumes also summon up the era without resorting to cliché. Sarah Howley and Daria Renka’s lighting and sound are similarly able and unfussy.

With the story revolving so much around the character of Glenn, there is a great deal of responsibility on Scott Kerr’s shoulders. At first it seems unlikely that the conniving, weasely character he creates would be the great ladies’ man he apparently is, but it becomes clear that it is an extremely subtle performance. His manoeuvring and intriguing puts him in an oddly sympathetic light, while his apparent vulnerability hints at his attraction for others. There are still moments, however, when we can almost see his mind working as he tries to improvise solutions to his problems, and there is always the hint of something extremely nasty underneath.

Perhaps the performance is all a bit too laid-back and understated; a little more in the way of fireworks might make the more obvious twists and turns seem a little less contrived. This is definitely a thriller, but the response of the audience is more slow-burn satisfaction than edge-of-the-seat suspense. A large amount of care and thought has gone into this production, however, with positive results, and anyone attending will surely leave satisfied.

Running time 2 hours 20 minutes including interval