

Review: Do You Have A Secret Crush (Sleeping With Straight Men) - The Lost Theatre - 19 August 2016



I feel like I am witnessing some kind of gay theatre tag team lately, as it seems **Denholm Spurr** is not the only young actor hot-footing it across London at the moment to appear in multiple stand-out productions at the same time, as we were tonight surprised to find **Richard Watkins**, (appearing alongside **Denholm** in **The Chemsex Monologues**), turning up on stage at the **Lost Theatre** in **Stockwell**, to appear in **Ronnie Larson's** somewhat lengthily titled "**Do You Have A Secret Crush? (Sleeping With Straight Men)**".

This play is based on the true story of a young gay man, here renamed **Stanley (Chris Britton)** whose instant obsession with a straight waiter, **Lee (Richard Watkins)** compels him to contact a New York chat show for an appearance that will have severe consequences for both, as **Stanley** decides to reveal his secret crush to an unsuspecting **Lee** in front of a studio audience on **The Jill Johnson Show**. (The name of the play being derived from the episodes trashy, tabloid title).



Given the nature of my last minute booking to see this show, I was initially unaware that the play was taking its dramatic cues from this real life event, and I must confess that my heart sank just a little when I started to recognise the story, purely because I was really enjoying the initial relationship between **Sally**, the small town drag artist (**Dave Lynn**) and **Stanley** (**Chris Britton**). **Chris** plays his part with a flirtatious, camp gusto that sometimes teeters on the edge of caricature, but thankfully manages to stay on the right side of the line for the most part . **Sally** becomes **Stanley's** confidant with who he shares his dreams of leaving his trailer park home in Pontiac, Michigan, to become famous and fall in love. This for me was by far the strongest character pairing throughout the play, which I could have easily continued to watch as their relationship unfolded, both characters being played at their best when in each others company.



However, I soon began to recognise the story from headlines back in 1995, and now becoming aware of where the plot was heading, I was glad that the strong direction (**Robert McWhir**) and inventive, albeit relatively sparse staging skilfully prevented the narrative from being played out in a more linear fashion. The audience were taken on a journey from the small town "Flamingo" gay club to the bright lights of the big city TV studio, and we became part of the action itself as the the fourth wall was broken several times, initially by **Dave Lynn** in glorious, full-on cabaret mode, and secondly as the theatre transformed itself into the TV studio for the recording of **The Jill Johnson Show** itself. Whilst this wasn't trying to be an immersive theatrical experience, it was a clever and engaging device that was used to great effect, as we all eagerly played our part by clapping and hollering on the chat show host's cue.



Whilst at these moments the play felt inventive, with some interesting split stage techniques and creative lighting (**Richard Lambert**) that helped transport us from location to location, the play did have some issues, most notably with the sound. There's no denying that the great use of some classic pop songs peppered throughout helped transport us back in time, (even if it did seem to take us back to the eighties, a decade before the actual events took place), but the music did, on occasion, linger in the background just a bit too long, resulting in it being more of a distraction from the main action instead of enhancing it. Tragically, the use of music seemed to be at its most unnecessary during the final scene, and swamped what could have otherwise been an exceptionally emotional moment, the drama of which was left to **Dave Lynn** to salvage with his poignant rendition of "**Rise Like A Phoenix**", (again, not in keeping with the era we had been taken to, but movingly performed all the same). Another pivotal scene that seemed to fall just short of its full dramatic potential was **Stanley's** seduction of **Lee**, the dialogue of which these two talented actors couldn't quite wrestle back from its brief slump into porn film style awkwardness... albeit one from the nineties). **Lee's** real life counterpart was also found to have mental health and drug issues, and I think it would have been interesting to have given **Richard Watkins** a little bit more of this dark side

to play with from the start, adding another layer to his character and increasing the sense of impending and inevitable jeopardy throughout.

If all that sounds a bit too serious for an enjoyable night at the theatre, then think again. There is plenty to enjoy here, with the first three quarters of the play being played very much for laughs.

Dave Lynn gives a fantastic performance as **Sally**, both in and out of drag, and both **Ruth Peterson** as **Jill Johnson** and **Helen Stirling** as **Stanley's Mum** are superbly cast in their roles. It is however **Louie Westwood** as **Brian**, the make-up artist and costume supervisor on **The Jill Johnson Show**, that manages to steal the stage from the sidelines whenever he appears, providing some of the biggest laughs of the night with some immaculate comic timing. Unfortunately there are only two days left of this production at the time of writing, but given that this is the third time this play has been produced in London, you just never know... there may be a chance to see it yet.

Is this the end of the theatrical tag team? Only time will tell! ****