

Theatre Review by John Foster

THE UNFRIEND

Written by Steven Moffat

Directed by Caroline Burr

Performed at Bournemouth Little Theatre

A clever and amusing conceit lies at the heart of Steven Moffat's new farce, *The Unfriend*: that the family harbouring an imagined serial killer (a spirited performance by Thea Wiles) as a house guest is transformed into a harmonious and good-humoured entity by her benign presence. This is a very funny idea played with aplomb by the ensemble of talented actors last night at its premiere at the Bournemouth Little Theatre.

Moffat is an experienced television scriptwriter (*Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*) and he brought the pace and deftness of the small screen to the stage. The belly laughs were plentiful and last night's packed audience relished every moment of this very funny play. The director, Caroline Burr, kept the pace up throughout the performance, yet was able to pause at significant moments, to lend depth and pathos to the action. Particularly effective was some of the absurdist dialogue involved in dealing with the alleged serial killer: Martyn French as the father of the household was especially adept in his role as the bridge between sanity and the wilder shores of idiocy. Much of the skill of the script and its delivery was the play on words and the innuendos which flourished in the cause of double-meaning. This was often hilarious and not a little chilling.

The family ensemble were particularly convincing and individualistic. A performative sleight-of-hand helped turn stereotypes into real characters, with genuine inner lives. Kim Fletcher as the mother was excellent, able to switch personalities from domestic suburbanite to crazed avenger in a second and with complete conviction. The teenage children, played by Emmeline Spirling as Rosie and Jo Campbell-Clarke as Alex, were strong and inventive support to the proceedings, bringing their own brand of generational humour to the proceedings. Michael Mackey as the highly irritating yet forgettable neighbour was essential as a member of the extended family and hilarious in his doddering preoccupations. Chaz Davenport as the cop gave a strong, sturdy performance, with enough implied threat to foreclose the diabolical goings-on.

With seven cast members, director Caroline Burr had her work cut out in orchestrating the action and keeping the piece dramatically on the boil. She managed to keep the play tight, taut, yet allowed the action to breathe and seem perfectly natural. Some of the lavatory humour in the second act was less welcome and was uncomfortably crude, although the audience seemed to enjoy it. This was part of the play as written, perhaps its weakest element, and it was executed with professionalism and in good faith by the ensemble.

The set design was fairly standard, allowing the action to filter effectively between situations. The set effectively evoked a standard suburban home, but might have been a little more imaginative and supportive of the play's themes and content. As it was the set served the play adequately. Short film clips were deftly introduced into the action without disrupting the naturalistic flow of the piece, and provided essential backstory.

The title of the play, in itself quite amusing, points to the age of social media. Trump also gets a mention or two in the piece, the serial killer being a fan and indeed had voted for Trump. These references sat happily in the text, even if the play itself felt as if it belonged to the age of Alan Ayckbourn and a lost timeless reality. The skill of the writing meant that these somewhat alien references could be incorporated without undermining the creative credibility of the piece.

A robust and engaging piece, bristling with laugh-out-loud humour, it is well worth a visit.