

“Scary Bikers” Review

by Juliette Risingham



Helmsley is so lucky to have such a vibrant Arts Centre and even luckier to have the excellent “in-house” theatre group “1812 Theatre Company” which stages 5 productions a year. Last year was particularly successful and varied – a rehearsed reading of “Under Milk Wood” sold out, “Cider With Rosie” was excellent despite Covid disruptions, the company’s very first musical “Jekyll and Hyde” earned rave reviews, a new director staged an accomplished contemporary play, “The Kitchen Sink”, and 1812’s ever popular pantomime “Cinderella” superb both on the stage and in the Box Office!

So, John Lister had his work cut out to maintain this momentum in 2024 by producing and performing in John Godber’s comedy “Scary Bikers”. Written in 2019, “Scary Bikers” is often erroneously described as a “Brexit Play” and a previous reviewer remarked that the play’s success would be ephemeral – she was right, but for the wrong reasons. After Godber had staged “Scary Bikers” in Wakefield, Scarborough and the West End – with himself and his wife Jane Thornton performing the two principals - the play quickly became popular all over the UK... but then, Covid struck. John Lister was within 9 days of staging the play in the White Lodge Hotel, Filey, when the first lockdown intervened and the brakes grounded the show to a halt.

Fast forward to 2023, and the theatres are open! The leader of 1812’s Play Reading Group, Jeanette Hambidge, had seen “Scary Bikers” in Scarborough and asked John Lister to lead a reading for the group with a view to his producing the play. John says, “I was in two minds to be honest but asked the readers to select the main theme of the play from a list – cycling, NHS, Brexit, levelling off, the miner’s strike, political comedy and bereavement. At the last minute I added ‘love story’ to the list and was quite surprised when everyone thought the play was a great love story.”

Scary Bikers is certainly a great love story in my eyes, but not one of conventional means. It focuses more on two unlikely friends learning how to fall back in love with adventure in the midst of grief, than a classic romance. This creates a heartwarming, incredibly funny, and poignant piece, that breathes fresh air into the idea of what a ‘love story’ truly is.

On the surface, redundant miner Don and former private school teacher Carol would seem to have little in common, but after experiencing the deaths of their partners, fate throws them together with neighbouring graves for their partners, and a mutual love for cycling. They could never have imagined how their lives would merge. An innocent coffee leads to a bike ride through the Yorkshire Dales, which in turn leads to a bike tour across Europe all the way to Florence, which leads to a new lease on life.

The two principals are played by John Lister and Kate Cawte who met in 2009 when John played Charles Condomine and Kate played Madame Arcati in 1812's production of Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" but they have not acted together since. Indeed, the play was very much a Lister/Cawte production as John's wife - Joanne Lister and Kate's daughter, Holly joined the crew and gradually took on much of the direction, while Kate's husband, Paul looked after the bikes. This team has worked together to create a wonderful world on the Helmsley Arts Centre stage; bringing the joys of biking, travelling, and debating, to the theatre. There is no question that staging a show centred around cycling and travel is a challenge, but the team excelled in bringing all of England, and Europe, to Helmsley. Presented is some of Godber's most heartfelt and vulnerable work to date. With present and past storylines running parallel, the audience learns to love, understand and empathise with Carol and Don. While they adventure to lands afar, they are able to hurdle an even more daunting task than biking up a never-ending hill - working through grief. Ultimately, the message you are left with is that life isn't over, even after you experience a great loss. With found community and friendship there are opportunities for new memories to be made, unexpected adventures to be had, and solidarity through shared experiences; even with people you don't always see eye to eye with.

Kate Cawte plays 'Carol' with an enchanting level of naturalism and comfort that instantly has you trusting and loving this character. She is honest with her portrayal and incredibly vulnerable when needed. When playing Don's deceased wife - the chatty and headstrong 'Jean' - she is unrecognisable from her other role, showing fantastic range and skill as a performer, especially when switching between roles in the space of mere seconds. She has some hilarious moments throughout, and holds real depth with both characters.

"When I lost Rob, I didn't know which way to turn. You don't; one day they're here and then there's just a big gaping nothingness." - Carol, played by Kate Cawte.

John Lister portrays the down-to-earth hospital porter - 'Don', as well as Carol's deceased husband, 'Rob'. As Don, John is immediately likeable, and greatly relatable. His comedic inputs are welcome additions throughout, and give a good amount of levity to some of the sadder moments, without taking away from these moving instances. Although Godber alludes to Don being 'big and rough' (of which, John Lister is neither), nothing is lost in Lister's portrayal of the role. His physical comedy in particular is fantastic and will have audiences howling with laughter. Saying that, John was also able to bring a huge amount of raw emotion to the stage. Some of the most tender moments were John's soliloquies of hope, desperation, and disappointment in the face of political crisis that were performed with such strength and determination. It leaves the audience unable to feel anything but inspired.

"Listen, I'm not getting into a debate about t'frigging establishment in t'middle of the neet!" - Don, played by John Lister.

The pair worked in excellent tandem, playing off of each other with ease and creating great chemistry between their characters that unfolds before our eyes - helping us root for a happy ending for this unlikely couple. Don and Carol feel like real people, you truly want the best for them through their grief. They keep us laughing, crying, and pondering throughout, as well as leaving us with bigger questions surrounding loss, politics, and UK healthcare. Many of the themes throughout feel very current, down to politicians behaving badly, lack of NHS funding, and the aftermath of Brexit, all managed with a pinch of salt and a bucket-full of humour - makes it an enjoyable and validating watch for anyone.

We can only hope that the 'Scary Bikers' initial 2019 success isn't lost after its drop-off during Covid, as it would be a shame to lose a story filled with so much heart and humour. Although John Godber is so prolific that most theatre groups may move on to his most current play - I'd hope that after the triumph of this production, theatre groups are left inspired and ready to get the bike rolling on further productions of this excellent play. 'Scary Bikers' is at Helmsley Arts Centre from the 21st - 24th February 2024 and it is not one to miss! Tickets are available at the Arts Centre or online at www.helmsleyarts.co.uk



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