

REVIEWS

Flesh and Blood, Wimborne Drama, Tivoli

IT is hard, perhaps, for people who live in primarily urban or suburban areas to understand the plight of small family farms. The countryside still looks attractive. There are cows and sheep in fields, corn and wheat wave in summer breezes, and you can buy excellent British meat in butchers shops or supermarkets, even if you don't have a farmers market in your town. But just a few miles from Wimborne town centre there are dairy farmers struggling to make ends meet, existing on ever-decreasing incomes driven down by the giant corporations who compete to provide cheap food for consumers. Every week there are dispersal sales as dairy herds are split up and farms sold off, with the land going to agribusinesses building up their holdings and the farmhouses going to wealthy incomers. This hidden but dramatic change in England's rural landscape is the background to Philip Osment's powerful play, *Flesh and Blood*, which was the daring choice for Paul Hewitt, making his debut as a director with the talented Wimborne Drama group.

Osment sets his play in a small family farm in Devon, over 30 years, as two brothers and a sister struggle to maintain a viable business, through foot and mouth disease and the rise of the supermarkets.

Rose, William and Charles were dominated by their brutal father: his influence is everywhere, and "what father would have wanted" dictates many of their decisions.

The arrival in the village of a mother and daughter who are despised as gypsies by the farmers provides the catalyst for change: the unstable younger brother, Charles, falls for the glitzy but shallow Shirley. Rose, the peacemaker, mistrusts the fickle girl, but wants to see her brother happy, and even the older William, who sacrificed a potential musical career to

work on the farm, is touched by her easy flirtatious charm. She brings colour into their hard-working lives.

Thirty years on, Shirley returns from Australia to find a very different scene - the attractive Charles is now an introverted taciturn old man, only interested in his rabbits, the farm is run-down, and Rose and William argue endlessly, but with no resolution, over selling the farm and moving into a bungalow in the village.

Shadows of the past and future hover around - in the first act the dreary, care-worn people they will become haunt the siblings' kitchen and living room, while the spirits of the youngsters who still had some hope are glimpsed as the drama moves to its shocking conclusion.

In a strong cast, David Pile as the older William stood out, conveying the courage, tenacity, and resilience of the old country-man who knows his world is dying. Fiona Sinclair had just the right brittle edge as the older Shirley and in Yvonne Henley's young Shirley we glimpsed the shallow unreliable nature that Rose instinctively recognises. Paul Dodman as the younger Charles managed the difficult balance of feckless charm and instability and the frantic last grasp at escape while the dangerous repressed nature of the older Charles came through in a muscular performance by Wimborne's town sergeant Chris Brown.

Jennifer Stacey and Chrissie Neal as the younger and older Rose captured the hopelessness of a woman who has sacrificed her life for what seems to be so little. And Mark Ellen, in the least rewarding part as the younger William, brought out the sense of an artistic temperament thwarted by duty.

This isn't an easy play. Indeed it is, as someone commented at the interval, pretty bleak. But Paul Hewitt's production brought out the humour as well as the sense of gathering doom.

And congratulations to whoever researched the programme notes which were excellent and informative. FC