

Communicating Doors

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In a programme note to this revival of his 1994 thriller, Alan Ayckbourn tells us that here, for the first time in his adult work, he used the sort of fantasy element he had been putting into his Christmas “family” plays. Characters finding themselves in other worlds or different times, which is what happens here.

Poopay, a leather-corseted dominatrix, hides in a hotel cupboard in July 2030 and steps out into October 2010. She is fleeing from Julian (Kim Wall), the wicked business partner of Reece (Ben Porter), who has murdered Reece’s first two wives and is seconds away from killing Poopay because of what she knows.

The senile Reece, himself seconds away from a heart attack, has written a confession of his business crimes and entrusted her with this dangerous document. So here she is, 20 years earlier, in the same room of the Regal Hotel, face to face with Ruella, Reece’s still unmurdered second wife. Ruella, in her turn, will step into the same cupboard and emerge in 1990, interrupting Jessica (Laura Howard), Reece’s first wife, on her wedding night.

What Ayckbourn conjures up for us is the old daydream that if we could only go back and change something (stop a murder, in this case) our lives would be different. A dead wife would still be living, for one thing, but also a man might be able to shed a life of crime.

Ruella, unexpectedly faced with a distraught Poopay in the middle of the night, will not take easily to the notion of time travel. Likewise Jessica confronted by Ruella warning of murder. We accept this for the sake of the drama but the means by which the characters come to accept it must be logically constructed, and this Ayckbourn does with consummate skill, frequently exploiting the situation’s potential for comic bewilderment and smart repartee. This particular time travel limits the traveller to one 20-year leap, and Ruella wonders if a relay team might take them back to Shakespeare. To which Poopay comments, “Yeah, to be or not to be – pass it on.”

In the role of Poopay, Laura Doddington gives an impressively well understood range of emotions – outrage, panic, sarcasm and eventually a touching revelation of sorrow, preparing us for the gracious ending engineered by Liza Goddard’s Ruella. Goddard’s command of crisply delivered comments and brisk decision-making is constantly entertaining.

Ayckbourn, who also directs, leaves us in this play with the feeling that good can outwit evil and chance encounters bless our lives.