

Haslingfield Little Theatre  
*RolePlay* by Alan Ayckbourn

### Guess who's coming to dinner?

By DeeDee Doke

A heavy rain is beating down on the London riverside apartment of Justin and Julie-Ann as the young couple prepare for a very special dinner party: they're going to introduce their parents over this meal. When Julie discovers that the cutlery for five people is short a fork, she must make a run out in the storm to get an additional fork to ensure she makes a good impression on Justin's mother.

But is the missing fork the only obstacle to a wonderful 'get acquainted' dinner? *RolePlay* was written by Alan Ayckbourn - so obviously everyone is in for a madcap roller-coaster ride of comedic drama, near disasters, revelations of unspoken truths and riotous characters. Ayckbourn is a master of examining the worst that could happen in everyday situations and delivering one-two-punches of unexpected calamity set to eye-wateringly funny wit. And his plays require a director that understands, and can play deftly with Ayckbourn's Machiavellian plot twists and hairpin turns - and get her/his cast to keep up the speed on the ride. Pace and comic timing are everything.

Haslingfield Little Theatre's Jonathan Holburn is such a director. What a treat this wickedly funny production of *RolePlay* was for much of its running time recently! From a cast that fully connected onstage and delivered an outstanding ensemble performance to a beautifully designed Thameside backdrop and an attractive, effective set that looked as if it came straight from Ikea, HLT's *RolePlay* covered all of its bases with flair, mad good humour and precision staging

The plot is a bit complicated. After Julie-Ann (Julie-Ann to her parents, Julie to Justin) departs on her fork-finding mission, Justin's solitude is interrupted by Paige Petite, who has fallen onto his flat's balcony from two floors above. Paige, a dancer of the lap-dancing club variety, is trying to escape her villain of a boyfriend who will be returning home soon to kill her and his thuggish security guard Micky Rale. Micky has been left to watch Paige while the boyfriend is away, and he soon arrives at Justin's door, looking for the escapee. Paige and Micky will end up staying for dinner, along with the expected guests - Julie-Ann's staid Yorkshire parents Derek and Dee and Justin's alcoholic mother Arabella. This is a dinner with life-changing effects.

Justin is the metaphorical maypole around whom all of the characters dance in *RolePlay*, and the bespectacled Philip Chapman was sympathetic and verbally nimble as the beleaguered IT worker who isn't sure he wants to settle down with whingey, ever-so earnest Julie-Ann (Katy Chapman). Paige, the exotic dancer (Laura Wylie), brings danger and sparkle into Philip's life, and he is not all that upset when the earthy, tough-talking dancer decides to take a bath in his flat after arriving rain-soaked on his balcony, and then stay for dinner.

Justin is less pleased when bodyguard turns up to recapture Paige. But Justin's woe turned into a rare delight for the audience with a howlingly funny turn from David Smithet as the not-too-smart, hulking Micky, a former boxer. Slackjawed, staring, Micky breathes through his mouth, a lumbering Frankenstein figure with a heart and need for respect. A vignette in which a silent Micky simply paced up and down in the flat drew bubbles of laughter from the audience that surged into full-blown gales was a theatrical gem.

As Derek and Dee, Julie-Ann's parents, John Beresford and Fiona Haskell were a perfectly contrasted pair of overbearing husband and his 'Stepford' wife with a glazed-eye, fixed smile on her face. The two of them both get to have a crack at one of the show's

incongruously funny, hushed tone lines - "We don't discuss Truro" - and provide chuckles galore throughout their time onstage.

A more frightening character is Justin's irascible alcoholic mother Arabella, played by Terry Baker, who is immediately dismissive of Julie-Ann but takes an equally quick shine to Paige and thinks that Paige is Justin's future intended.

A regular hallmark of Ayckbourn's plays is that he sprinkles a bit of magic dust at the end for characters he likes, sending them on to happy lives. So he does with *RolePlay* - and in the hands of HLT, this show created its very own magic dust for its audiences.