

N.J. Crisp's *Dangerous Obsession* by Maitland Repertory Theatre

Review by Genevieve Graham

'An Unexpected Guest'

He stands so stiffly in his suit and the tension is palpable.

In N.J. Crisp's *Dangerous Obsession* a trio of actors dominate the stage and a thrilling madness takes hold. It begins when Sally, the lady of an upmarket house in rural England, receives a surprise guest. The man, John, claims they've met before but she doesn't remember him. He reintroduces himself in the conservatory, the place where the entire play is set. Something tells me Sally is not going to forget the strangely off-putting John again, even with the number of gin and tonics she consumes. When her husband Mark returns home from work the undeniable sense of foreboding really picks up.

From the beginning of this play I constantly ask myself who are these people, really? This didn't stop with the final act as this story raises questions around loss, human behaviour and truth. Director Kaysia Dowie keeps her audience in a state of delightful tension as we try to figure out what the hell is happening. With an enchanting set reminiscent of *Midsomer Murders* there are plenty of places to avert your eyes as the awkward interactions between the characters intensify. Ironically the set's array of plants and a calming water feature in the corner are a relaxing backdrop to the events that unfold.

The small cast command the stage for its entirety. Keeping up the intensity of a character and a faultless English accent to boot is no easy feat. A feat all three actors achieved. William Cesista, who plays John, is so awkwardly rigid as he confronts the wealthy couple. From his thoughtfully styled drab suit to his nerdy glasses he had me hooked. Denni Mannile, as Sally, keeps the peace and is extremely thoughtful, until the gin and tonics start kicking in. Mannile plays this tricky character well, keeping up the English composure whilst playing a game of psychological chess with John. Then there's Thomas Henry as Mark, a man who is normally in control in his business but now finds himself as a husband completely out of his comfort zone. Henry does so well transitioning from a man with confidence dripping from every pore to a man challenged and defenceless.

With a title like *Dangerous Obsession* you have to expect to see something at least a little testing. In saying that I thoroughly enjoyed this play. There is something constantly hovering just overhead and you can feel that weight building. Audiences will relish the unexpected elements of this play. Part of the joy of this production is letting the story bring you in to embrace what remains unclear. After all as John says "there's a little thing called madness in all of us."

Maitland Repertory Theatre's *Dangerous Obsession* by N J Crisp at Maitland Repertory Theatre, 244 High Street, Maitland

14 February to 3 March, 2024