

## Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Blue Remembered Hills*

by Dennis Potter

Brink Productions

Space

When it was first broadcast on BBC Television in January 1979, *Blue Remembered Hills* was a play about children which made a very big impression. Yet again breaking the rules of TV naturalism, dramatist Dennis Potter had cast adults to play seven year olds. There was bulky Yorkshire playwright Colin Welland in a fair isle jumper and braces, satirist John Bird in a cowboy hat and RSC actor Helen Mirren in white ankle sox and pigtails.

Potter said he wanted to restore a true sense of scale to childhood experience. When the school bully pinned you to the ground and gobbled in your face he was as hulking as Michael Elphick, not some cute little boy with freckles and a boisterous way with him. Interestingly, what was a radical departure for literal, photographic television is a familiar device for the stage - used by many playwrights including David Holman, whose Magpie commission, *The Small Poppies*, was recently revived, featuring its original director, Geoffrey Rush.

In this Brink Productions version, director John O' Hare has shown that the play works every bit as well on stage as it does in the Forest of Dean . Co-designed by O'Hare and Justin Pennington the set has a stylised mound at centre stage which is given vegetation by sprays of greens and browns from lighting designer Mark Pennington. There is a pool at the edge of the stage where luckless victims get periodic dunkings, ropes hang like lianas waiting for Tarzan swoops, while at the back, at mezzanine level, is the hayloft where the eventual tragedy unfolds.

As ever, Brink has gathered an able team. William Allert as Willie and Syd Brisbane as Peter have the daunting task of establishing much of the initial detail. The 1940s wartime setting, their fathers in varying degrees of combat danger, their mothers coping and not coping with varying degrees of anxiety- all of this is revealed directly and by implication as the boys quarrel and reconcile, torment and support each other. Allert is excellent as the endlessly gormless Willie, Brisbane astutely captures the

familiar mix of stropiness and vulnerability in Peter. The rapid mood swings of childhood are tellingly displayed as Potter uses all of the children as lenses, both perceptive and distorted, into the adult world.

When Audrey, portrayed with fierce energy by Lizzie Falkland, and Rebecca Havey's seductively manipulative Angela, play mothers and fathers with Donald, they echo the abrasive language of their own parents- the men bellowing orders, the women argumentative and scolding. No sooner has one game dissolved into sulking and tears than another combination reconvenes. After Peter has been beaten by John, staunchly represented by David Meador, he reasserts himself against Donald (an inventive Justin Ractliffe) using his hated nickname, Donald Duck. Potter shows the teasing to be as relentless as it is arbitrary and cruel.

With its random violence, its shifts from bravado to fear and back again, *Blue Remembered Hills* charts the intensity of a day in a child's life. Well, a child running rampant in the Forest of Dean at any rate. The many games about shooting and death, the frantic annihilation of a squirrel followed by tearful remorse, (particularly from the stammering Raymond, played with touching unworldliness by Jed Kurzel) - all of these anticipate the climactic crisis of the fire in the barn and doom for poor neglected Donald Duck.

John O'Hare has created an exuberance with this production with plenty of scampering around the perimeter and a very clear sense of the shifts in pecking order from scene to scene. The thick Gloucestershire dialect - "him showed I" and "doosn't thee forget it, you great babby" - is heroically managed by the cast and the blend of pathos and high farce is well maintained. But for all the accomplishment of the production, Potter's ironic invocation of Housman and the nostalgic blue remembered hills of childhood, his fatalist narrative and his almost programmatic determinism allow the work little resonance and no escape. This is Dennis Potter's Beano version of original sin, an unconsoling tract from Chapel with precious few stars in its crown.

