



Born to ache in Ayckbourn: Brenda Blethyn and Barry McCarthy

Not much fun in Ayckbourn's Wildest Dreams

## Laugh - I nearly cried

**Michael Billington**

**A**N OUTSIDER arrives to shatter a world of cosy illusion: a standard dramatic theme since Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. And Alan Ayckbourn, not for the first time, deploys it in *Wildest Dreams* which arrives at *The Pit* two years after its Scarborough debut. But what makes this such a disturbing and arresting comedy is that Ayckbourn suggests there are no rules about human behaviour: some people need fantasy, others can survive reality.

Ayckbourn presents us with a group of suburbanites united only by a passion for role-playing board games. Stanley is a nervously nice teacher married to fretful, childless Hazel. Rick (née Alice) is a butch loner haunted by memories of childhood abuse while Warren is an adolescent wizard who's convinced himself he's an alien. Into their weekly world of *Dungeons and Dragons*-type games erupts the gushing Marcie: a runaway wife who camps out with Rick, gives Stanley and Warren romantic delusions, and throws the settled pattern of relationships into disarray.

If this were a neat, formulaic comedy, the point would be clear: a group of enclosed fantasists would be destroyed by contact with reality. But late Ayckbourn suggests that life is never that easy or simple. Shy

Stanley may be shattered to discover that his romantic dreams about Marcie are one-sided; on the other hand, love gives him the courage to stand up to his bullying brother-in-law. And what are we to make of Rick who starts out a recluse and by the end has acquired a stable companion in Marcie?

Ibsen offered contradictory arguments in different plays. Ayckbourn gives you clashing viewpoints within the same play which is what makes *Wildest Dreams* both fascinating and a bit unwieldy. Some scenes, such as that in which self-hating Hazel cries that she's wasted her body, are full of vintage Ayckbournian hilarious sadness. At other moments you feel he's working overtime to match board-game illusions to reality.

But Ayckbourn's own production, ingeniously designed by Roger Glossop to interweave three acting areas, fits snugly into *The Pit* — the sound effects are particularly fine. And the cast is a judicious mix of old and new. Barry McCarthy as the harassed Stanley, Peter Laird as the hideous taxman and Gary Whitaker as the inter-galactic Warren happily survive from Scarborough. And, amongst the newcomers, Brenda Blethyn as the regressing Hazel, Jenna Russell as the confused Rick and Sophie Thompson as meddling Marcie are unimpeachable.

*The Pit* (071-638-8891) until March 12.

## Billington On Wildest Dreams

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