

Michael Billington
on Alan Ayckbourn's
Invisible Friends

Child's play

WHERE have all the children gone? Alan Ayckbourn's *Invisible Friends* is a wonderfully witty, imaginative play for family audiences. In the Cottesloe on the first night looked like Judea after Herod had been at work. There is plenty in the play for adults to enjoy but it needs the spontaneous liveliness of seven plusses to achieve total lift-off.

Ayckbourn unashamedly re-works a theme he employed in *Woman in Mind*: the inherent danger of fantasy families. His heroine, Lucy Saines, is a sparky teenager who compensates for the drear dullness of her own family by creating an invisible friend, Zara.

But when Zara, a mixture of Heidi and a district nurse suddenly materialises one night she brings with her a white-suited father and brother who supplant Lucy's own kin while turning out themselves to be a little less than kind.

You can find all sorts of echoes in the play: *Harvey*, *Bill the Spirit*, *Pease Pone*. But what strikes me is the way Ayckbourn combines eye-opening magic with a deeply disenchanting view of family life.

He takes a quietly billious view of uncommunicative families which reminds me of a marvelous painting I saw recently in Hamburg's Kunsthalle. Called *Sunday Afternoon* it shows a father slumped in armchairs and a mother gazing wanly at the lunch-table while a bright-eyed kid desperately looks for signs of life. Clearly the problem is universal.

Zippily directed by Ayckbourn himself and masterfully designed by Roger Glassop, the piece boasts a splendidly outgoing performance by Emma Chambers whose body arches and lunges with frustration as she tries to get her family to listen to her news that she has been selected for the school swimming-team.

There is also something ominously starved about Claire Skinner's Zara who looks as if she is about to announce any moment that the hills are alive with the sound of music. Good work too from Bill Moody as the couch-potato real father and from Simon Chandler as the immaculate fantasy one.

In the end, it's a richly ambivalent play that says, rather like *Into The Woods*, that you can make your wishes come true but that you're in dead trouble if they do. But adults, I suspect, should only be admitted if accompanied by a child.

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