

Blackbirds Review (Anthony Brown)

The play is set some time in the future but the clothing and decor suggest not too far. The government's solution to homelessness is subsidised accommodation provided by exploitative landlords. Nobody appears to care about the standard of provision for the Economically High Risk Persons that are housed, nor about what else happens in the same property.

Bridget lives in an underground multi-storey flat in complete darkness when the lights go out, through the enforced power cuts. For the same reason there is often no heating. Bridget has a little lamp permanently on and uses a torch to see around for much of the time. In the freezing cold she wears everything she can. Tenants aren't allowed visitors and the manager monitors via CCTV.

Rup, a daft visitor comes when the manager is out and brings Bridget things he finds on the landfill. Today he brings some clothing and a half empty bottle of whiskey – which keeps Bridget going. Rup has a thing about blackbirds and dead blackbirds. We hear blackbirds singing. Slaves dressed dance, unseen to the characters in the play. The audience also hears singing from time to time and one of the songs is based on the nursery rhyme Sing a Song of Sixpence. We get the impression that there is something badly wrong in this underground complex – something connected with slavery and something connected with Rup's blackbird obsession.

When Bridget hears a knock at the door, a young woman desperately wanting to come in, she is terrified at the prospect of being caught. The young woman is three months pregnant, knows that Bridget used to be a midwife and wants help. The fear and desperation of both the women continues for some time with the young woman refusing to give up and Bridget increasingly frightened and frustrated. The young woman eventually gets in by demonstrating that she has access to the heating control and she can relieve Bridget of the misery of the cold. The young woman is well dressed but has lied and is about to give birth. When it turns out that is a breach birth the desperation of both women escalates to near panic. The young woman works for the Manager as an administrator and via the office computer she knows Bridget's personal details. However although apparently in a much better place than Bridget she isn't allowed out except to go to the bank. For some reason the manager has almost complete control of her and this includes denying her access to any medical intervention.

As the story unfolds we start to learn the full horror of what is going on in the lower flats. Twenty four of the rooms are where men come to rape girls. Twenty four rooms - we are reminded of four and twenty blackbirds in a pie. The more we hear the worse it gets. The young woman is in fact the alpha female who controls the girls having herself once been one of the girls but now working for Rup under the threat of harm to her brother Jamie. We learn that the girls are beaten as an example to the others and that they often sing to Rup; the one who pleases him best being relieved of rape for that day. The singing we have been hearing starts to make sense and so do the blackbirds.

When Rup knocks on the door both girls are terrified. Rup comes in but gradually his personality starts to change to someone more canny than the old Rup. The new Rup knows that the young woman is hiding in the room and quickly finds her. He departs.

The young woman goes into labour desperately wanting the boy that Rup demands of her and Bridget manages to turn the baby and deliver a baby girl. We start to realise the terrifying

consequences of this as Rup returns as the manager, well dressed now and clearly affluent. We now see the callous exploitative nature of Rup who feels nothing but disdain for Bridget and sees the young woman as his chattel and plaything, to abuse and humiliate. She is offered a terrible choice.

The play ends with Bridget explaining to the young woman how she can not only escape but also destroy Rup financially through her access to the computer and finances. But the young woman cannot break free and apparently unable to take what must seem to everybody an easy escape to a world of safety and normality.

The play develops slowly but with a tension that holds the listener in a state of suspended apprehension. The tension of the two women increases as the horror unfolds and the listener comes to understand that all the singing and dancing is about something very sinister and that Rup has built his obsession with blackbirds into his merciless use of enslaved girls as playthings in a truly shocking way.

At first we are amused by Bridget's ramblings in the Irish vernacular but soon enough the murmurings of audience laughter are replaced by deathly silence. Some people are visibly shattered as they exit at the end. This is indeed a play for something other than entertainment. As one person put it: "Not enjoyable but deeply thought provoking and superbly acted." There is no doubt that the play works and whilst there are times when you are impatient for the dialogue to progress, you hang onto every word, experiencing the tension of the two women, waiting in hope for some sort of resolution.

But what really makes the play work is the extent to which it highlights the issues of modern day slavery. Futuristic and surrealistic though it might be, the horror is made all the more real by the gradual development from an undifferentiated and not fully understood fear to the full realisation of what is actually going on. A true to life modern day play on the same theme could not work as well.

Donna has researched her subject well. Nothing is overstated. All the slavery references in the play have happened in real life and much of it in East Lancashire:

- The trafficker has a multi faceted personality – charming and kind on the one hand and callous and exploitative on the other
- The trafficker will entrap girls with kindness and create a bond which the girl sees as love to the extent she will do anything he asks
- Violence and humiliation are used to control victims.
- Girls are beaten and raped to break them in.
- Girls are beaten in front of the others to make an example of those who disobey or try to escape.
- Girls are trained through violence to keep a smile on their face
- The victim is held by fear of violence or threat to family. Sometimes it is a debt that has to be repaid.
- The girls cannot escape. If fear does not hold them then locks and bars do.
- Seeking medical help is something that the trafficker will avoid at all cost; it is a last resort and one where the victim will need to be closely supervised.
- The alpha female who controls the girls may have once been a victim herself.

- Sometimes the girls are transported overland from other countries but sometimes it is by air and they are met at the airport by another trafficker
- Having to service ten men a day is normal and £600 per day is what a girl is expected to earn.

Apart from the above I am left with two thoughts:

- In the play Bridget says that people would have noticed. But people don't notice. Modern day slavery is a crime hidden in plain sight and it is up to everybody to be vigilant in spotting the signs. We should report it to the Police when something doesn't look right and probably isn't.
- Bridget calls the young woman Echo because of her broken record approach in persuading Bridget to let her in. This is an interesting allusion to Echo in Greek mythology where Echo grieves for the loss of her loved one and wastes away till she exists only as an Echo. In the realisation of what she has done the young woman asks Bridget if Echo becomes herself again. Like Echo we wonder if these girls ever can become themselves again.