



'Larkin with Women: An Inside View'

Maeve Brennan reviews Ben Brown's play *Larkin with Women*, produced at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough, 5-27 November 1999, and published by Faber and Faber (1999), £4.50. ISBN 0-571-20472-4

From *About Larkin* 9, April 2000

Ben Brown's play focuses on a dilemma which Andrew Motion revealed in his biography of Larkin but did not highlight [1](#). This concerns a period of three years when Larkin was emotionally involved with three women simultaneously. The truth, however, was not quite as sensational as it may seem.

The action of the play opens in 1955 when Larkin takes up his appointment as Librarian at the University of Hull. By this time, Monica, a lecturer in the English department at the University of Leicester, had been his close companion for eighteen years. They had met and become lovers when Larkin worked in the Library there from 1946 to 1950. Of all his relationships this was the most intimate and enduring.

Maeve had been on the Library staff at Hull two years when Larkin arrived but did not get to know him well until 1960 when he coached her for a Library Association exam and they fell in love. For the next eighteen years they maintained their emotional attachment in spite of Larkin's continuing relationship with Monica.

Betty joined the staff as Larkin's secretary in 1957. Their relationship, though professionally close, did not become intimate until 1975 when they became lovers. Thus, from 1975 until 1978, when Maeve dropped out of the equation (still knowing nothing of Betty's involvement), Larkin was emotionally, though not sexually, as the play makes clear, entangled with all three women.

Maeve, a practising Roman Catholic with strict principles about pre-marital sex, had always been ambivalent about some aspects of the intimate side of their relationship. When, in the play, Betty enquires at the onset of her own affair with Larkin: 'What's the situation with Maeve?' he admits their love-making is 'only occasional' because 'her principles keep getting in the way'. Whereupon Betty asks what the position is with Monica. 'She's rather lost interest', he replies, which left the field clear for Betty even though in 1975 Larkin was still emotionally embroiled with the other two. Even after the break with Maeve three years later, he never completely let go of her, and all three women were round his death bed in 1985.

The dramatist of course has to telescope events - which in this case cover thirty years -

into two acts of approximately fifty minutes each, resulting in the sacrifice of detail and the natural evolution of circumstances. Given that Brown bases the action on Motion's *Life*, corroborated by his own interviews with the women themselves, the presentation of these complexities is generally accurate. However, in a psychological drama of this degree of contortion, character interpretation is of fundamental importance, and since these are not fictional characters, and all three women are still alive, the characterisation must be as authentic as possible. Brown achieves this with considerable success, although I do have some reservations.

Larkin is portrayed credibly by Brown, and played convincingly by Oliver Ford Davies. The humour and quick repartee, the cynicism, the irascibility and philandering are vividly revealed, but I should have preferred his character to have had more of the tenderness and vulnerability which were present in such good measure in the man I knew. Quite rightly Brown shows Larkin, the highly competent librarian and widely acclaimed poet, as weak and indecisive in the arms of his women folk. But Brown does not pass judgement; he merely shows how Larkin allowed himself to drift into an unholy mess from which he found it impossible to extricate himself. Musing on his situation with patent sincerity, Larkin reflects:

God, how did I get myself into this?... Don Juan in Hull... I'd only had two women before I met you three. I'm *not* a philanderer, I'm *not* accustomed to keeping lots of girls on a string, I'm extremely faithful by nature.

The dialogue which gives the characters life, and particularly Larkin, is a daring but successful blend of Brown's own lines and Larkin's utterances culled from interviews, letters and other sources, and often reproduced verbatim. The first half of the passage quoted above (to 'you three') is Brown's invention; the rest is taken from a letter which Larkin wrote to me in September 1967! (The purpose of the letter, however, was far from an attempt at humour; it was a note of heartfelt apology.) Other examples of the use of Larkin's words are similarly effective. 'I've said it before. I just see life more as an affair of solitude diversified by company rather than the other way round', he says, as he tries to discourage Monica from applying for a job at Hull. And, after reading part of 'Aubade' to Maeve, he comments: 'They're publishing it in the Christmas issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*. That should put them off their turkey...'. This does not come over as plagiarism; rather it gives the play authenticity, enriches the dialogue and enhances the humour.

In any case Brown himself is not lacking in wit. The following exchange strikes me as one of the funniest in the play. Larkin has just been advised by his doctor to cut down on drink:

I hardly drink at all nowadays as it is... Gin once a day, instead of two or three; beer at lunchtime as usual, and a bit of cheap Spanish red to replace the gin at supper. Perhaps a glass of port last thing...

The audience feels like chanting in unison with Monica: 'Next to nothing, then'.

A more obvious technique Brown employs is to punctuate the dialogue with Ford Davies's readings of Larkin's poetry to reflect his moods. A romantic scene with Maeve, for example, closes with the first verse of 'When first we faced and touching showed'; a

gloomy conversation with Monica about the possible outcome of his pending operation for cancer ends with a stanza from 'Aubade'. A similar effect is achieved by playing some of Larkin's favourite jazz tunes. The seduction scene with Betty finishes to the tune of 'Let's Misbehave'; the deathbed scene closes most movingly to the strains of 'I Can't Give You Anything but Love'.

Thus Brown builds up understanding for the beleaguered poet so that by the end of the play the audience feels more sympathy for him than his behaviour deserves. Monica speaks for the spectators as well as for all three women when she says to him on his deathbed:

Oh well. I guess you must have some redeeming qualities. Otherwise we wouldn't stick by you, would we?

Oliver Ford Davies's natural amiability also did much to engage the audience's sympathy for his character. He added the right touch of benevolence which was entirely in accord with my perception of Larkin. Without trying to imitate his voice or to look like him physically, Davies nevertheless captured to perfection not only Larkin's humour and laconic way of expressing it, his cynicism and cantankerousness, but also his mannerisms - the odd way Larkin used to hold up one hand when he was thinking, or wanted to say something; the way he stuck his thumbs under his braces. (Yes, Larkin invariably wore braces!) Davies not only gave a fine performance but he was also the perfect choice for the part.

The characterisation of Monica, the confident, long-term lover, ably played by Carolyn Backhouse, was masterly. Monica's intellect and knowledge of English literature - her professional speciality - matched Larkin's own, thereby enabling them to spar on equal terms. Her dialogue in the play is crisp and witty, her repartee swift and playful. When Larkin admits his affair with Maeve but denies he's sleeping with her, Monica retorts: 'I know you. You wouldn't have an affair and leave out the sex'. When later on he volunteers he's not seeing Maeve 'at the moment', Monica snaps: 'At the moment? What? You mean, for five minutes?'

Backhouse played her superbly. Flamboyant, unconventional, audacious - she admits going down to dinner once in her pyjamas in protest against the stuffy management of their holiday hotel - she is at the same time stunningly glamorous. Her animated interplay with Ford Davies reflected that blend of cerebral banter and tender concern which must have forged Monica's relationship with Larkin.

Betty, the mature, competent secretary, crisply played by Susie Blake, has, like Monica, a clearly defined professional role which gives her a secure, down-to-earth, unsentimental affinity with Larkin long before they become lovers. This enables her to deal briskly and humorously with his fantasies and phobias. To his dismay, she demolishes his gloomy prediction that he will die at the age of 63 by readily agreeing with him. 'Yes, you will because you've programmed yourself to. Mind over matter'.

Blake strikes just the right note as the perfect secretary, brisk, cool, imperturbable, the recipient of her boss's emotional and professional confidences, to which she responds with down-to-earth wisdom. She is relaxed but decisive. Even after the love scene she remains in control and does not let her heart rule her head.

Maeve, sensitively played by Susy Aitchison, is portrayed, by contrast, as diffident, romantic and rather earnest. Dramatically she is a perfect foil to the other two, more assertive women. A shadowy figure 'from Periodicals', her position and function in the Library, apart from her being coached for a library exam by Larkin, are never explained. This puts her at a professional and intellectual disadvantage with the audience. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* (26.xi.99), Sean O'Brien commented: 'for Larkin to care so much for so long there should be more steel and substance in Maeve's character'. Had Brown given her some professional clout and shown her discussing library matters with Larkin, as she did daily in real life, then she would have seemed on a more equal footing intellectually with the other characters. (In fact, Maeve held a senior post in the library in charge of a department.) In spite of this deficiency, however, she comes over credibly, notwithstanding her Catholicism and outdated moral outlook which must have struck an end-of-millennium audience as unbelievably naïve.

Aitchison later told me she realised that in order to play the part convincingly, she had to get my convictions and reactions right. Consequently she consulted a Catholic priest about the Church's teaching on sex outside marriage in the 1950s and 1960s. He confirmed that it was restrictive and uncompromising, and presented a grave dilemma for anyone in a close emotional relationship. Thus briefed, Aitchison projected Maeve's point of view with utmost conviction, and also with gentleness and dignity. Even when she sweeps off stage after a quarrel with Larkin, declaring angrily 'Well, I've had enough. And you can stuff your bloody *Larkinland*', she does so with poise, her self-esteem intact.

Much credit for the interpretation of both the characters and the action of the play must go to the producer, Alan Strachan, whose direction was remarkably sympathetic, sensitive and discreet. He is to be congratulated for resisting the temptation to sensationalize the seduction scenes (which the audience never sees) or to trivialize Maeve's principles, notwithstanding Larkin's taunts. Strachan's unfailing understanding of the complexity of the situation and the interaction of the three very different women with Larkin is what propels the play to its very moving end.

What was most striking about Blake's and Aitchison's stage appearance was their close physical resemblance to the real-life Betty and Maeve. (I cannot be so confident about Backhouse but she too seemed remarkably like the Monica I saw only fleetingly thirty and more years ago). They dressed as we did, copied our hairstyles, walked and talked as we did. Two former colleagues, who saw the play before I did, 'phoned to tell me that the impersonation of Betty and me was so realistic that they could easily have persuaded themselves that it was actually us on stage. In fact a stranger, who by extraordinary coincidence turned out to be a cousin of Monica's, identified me in the theatre restaurant through my stage namesake - in spite of our thirty year age difference. At this point I had not even seen Susy Aitchison, let alone met her. Impersonation can't get more authentic than that.

Apart from the tremendous relief of finding the play so much more satisfying than I had anticipated - I had seen and objected to an early draft but had no idea what to expect of the completed version - one of the most rewarding experiences was meeting the cast. They were so friendly, enthusiastic and obviously delighted to meet their real-life counterparts. (Monica regrettably was not well enough to travel to Scarborough.) The women said they had never played living characters before and were therefore particularly anxious to get us right. They told me their rehearsal room walls were papered

with our photographs at various stages in our lives, that they watched video-tapes on which we featured and listened to audio-tapes continuously in an effort to portray us as faithfully as possible. Their diligence certainly paid off.

Meeting Monica's cousins - a brother and sister - was also an unexpected pleasure. The brother had already seen the play and on this occasion had brought his sister along. He produced a family photograph showing Monica's mother who, he explained, was one of the oldest of eleven siblings, while he and his sister were the children of a much younger brother. They had lost touch with Monica many years ago and more recently had read in a local newspaper article that she had died. Assuring them that this was untrue, I gave them her address as they were anxious to re-establish contact. I found this unexpected encounter, and that of meeting the cast, very heartening. They helped to dispel my natural misgivings about the play and changed the occasion from one of dread to one of memorable enjoyment.

The fact that *Larkin with Women* earned so many good reviews in the national, regional and theatrical press speaks for itself. The *Daily Express* drama critic voted it 'Play of the Year'; *Guardian* critic, Michael Billington, mentioned it three times in his review of the year's plays (29.xii.99); Charles Spencer (*Daily Telegraph*, 15.xi.99) described it as 'funny, generous and touching, a portrait that honours both the man and his work' and applauded Brown as 'a dramatist of great wit and warmth whose future looks exceptionally bright.' Brown told me that he had dreaded my verdict most of all but in the event wrote 'I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have your approval at last! It's the icing on the cake of a wonderful experience for me.' (23.xi.99). After seeing it a second time, I would add that watching this play was a moving, even uplifting experience: which must be quite a notable accolade from one so intimately involved. Even my parish priest pronounced it 'wonderful'!

¹ Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber), 1993.