

Crash!

West Yorkshire Playhouse – 30 October 2010

A review by Clare Juland

Having met up with my fellow Horizon member Lisa and enjoyed a very pleasant lunch, we made our way to the West Yorkshire Playhouse. The theatre looks relatively new, at least the building anyway. Inside I'd describe it as functional rather than decorative. However this didn't distract from the highly entertaining and thought invoking performance of William Nicholson's world premiere of *Crash!*

The stage was set out as a large living room with a long couch, a scantily clad female mannequin coffee table, fireplace, artworks and a staircase at the back. Enclosing this area a kind of window aperture, giving the impression of an enormous plate glass patio doorway. To one side of this stood a plinth, later to become the setting for a much discussed sculpture. Above the patio doorway a series of blacked out windows added to the effect of looking at the side of a large house.

We had what were arguably the best seats in the house. Because of the steeply sloping auditorium the first three rows were considerably lower down, giving us an uninterrupted view of the happenings on stage. It also allowed the audience to really get 'involved' with the play, a more intimate atmosphere. In comparison to larger theatres, where one is rather cut off from the stage, this was infinitely preferable.

The play opens with the reuniting of a group of friends. Humphrey, played by Steven Pacey, is a sculptor who has made a living, but only just. Meanwhile his old friend Nick, played by Colin Mace, has done extremely well for himself. He is a financial securities trader and leads a lavish lifestyle with his five houses, including the mansion where this gathering takes place.

It is apparent from the outset that Nick is deeply afraid of the public backlash upon the banking industry following the financial meltdown. He employs a number of staff both as servants and security watchers. They are instructed to monitor for intruders and also ramblers as Nick has had a footpath moved off his land.

Christine, played by Carolyn Backhouse, is Humphrey's wife and an old flame of Nick's. She is a London schoolteacher and something of an eco-warrior. Nick's excesses impress her but at the same time she finds it hard to justify them, although she doesn't disapprove of *him*. He is delighted to see her and is quite open that he still has feelings for her. Nick is divorced from his former wife and currently lives with Eva, played by Helen Bradbury, a beautiful Croatian girl whom he has only known for three weeks.

Nick has purchased a sculpture from Humphrey who proceeds to assemble the artwork. In short it comprised of a series of bicycle wheels with scoop shaped sails attached that catch in the wind. Steven carried it all on stage, piece by piece. One or two parts looked rather heavy, though I'm sure he made it appear more so than it actually was. Cue Steven with his back to the audience, doing a

bit of DIY!! Armed with spanner and with some assistance from his fellow cast members, Humphrey's masterpiece took shape.

Nick is enthralled by the latest addition to his art collection and insists that Humphrey is undervalued. He wants to take Eva out into the park to admire it, but as she has no shoes on, takes Christine instead. During a conversation with Eva, it becomes clear that Humphrey is rather troubled. He seems filled with self-doubt and is rather bewildered by the person Nick has become. Back in the day their friendship was strong, now it is about to be put to the test.

Christine returns to find Eva mimicking the pose of the mannequin coffee table. She appears to like her even though at first one might think she is merely a gold-digger. Christine tells her about how much fun the three friends used to have years ago and how none of them were rich back then. With dinner soon to be served, Christine joins her husband who has gone to change and clean up.

Now we discover the reason for the windows above the patio door. The blackout curtain was raised to reveal a bathroom set. It was very effective in conveying the notion of Humphrey and Christine talking in their guest room. The two discuss Nick and his lifestyle fervently. Humphrey is clearly torn; on the one hand he could use the money Nick is prepared to pay him, while on the other he feels morally hung up over accepting it.

Relaxing, the friends catch up on old times and it is revealed that the sculpture is made from pieces of their old three-man cycle called Buttercup, in turn inspired by the Goodies, a TV show from the 70's. For a while Nick is bewildered at this revelation, but then actually starts to like the idea. However under the jollity Humphrey is still troubled by the outrageousness of Nick and his way of life. The focus begins with the cheque and gradually escalates into a full-blown debate on the matter of wealth versus poverty.

Both Steven and Colin Mace were excellent in this scene. At one point their respective characters almost broke into a fight, but somehow the friends restrain themselves. It was as if in this one moment all the world's anger towards the excesses of the rich bankers was being focussed on Nick through Humphrey. Both justified their case with equal measure, resulting in a scene of the finest drama from all on stage.

After the interval Humphrey decides that perhaps he and Christine should leave, however she is reluctant to do so without saying goodbye first. Nick has wandered into the park and while Christine goes to find him, Humphrey slumps on the couch, exhausted from the arguments. Seeing his plight Eva offers to give him a massage to ease the tension and surprisingly he allows her. Eva intrigues Humphrey. She represents many aspects of life that he has denied himself. Self indulgence for one. He is the kind of person who always puts others first. Eva suggests that this is what makes him angry and depressed.

When Nick and Christine catch up she tries to come to an understanding with him. Not an apology in the traditional sense, but merely that they can agree to disagree. She reveals that she has dreamed about him and this once again fires

the feelings he has for her. Like Eva to Humphrey, Nick represents all the things she cannot allow herself to be.

Now Christine discovers Eva still massaging Humphrey's head. This was quite an amusing moment. It is also the first indication of the hidden depths of the Eva character. She turns from confident young woman to someone who is concealing deep anxiety and runs to find her boyfriend. We discover that Christine and Humphrey aren't quite the perfect couple we perhaps imagined them to be at first. Like everyone else they have their fair share of problems. Eva's massage brings this to the surface, but they find reconciliation later on.

Nick returns and the debate resumes, but this time it's done in a much more adult way. There are no personal envies and Nick actually accepts that Humphrey and Christine disapprove of his being so rich. He argues that there isn't such a thing as a fair reward. Everyone is out for what they can get, just that some are able to get more than others. Humphrey and Christine face up to the fact that this is just as true as their earlier arguments.

Eva enters with some cheese toasties, since Nick's houseman has hurt himself helping to put up the sculpture. A loud sound effect suddenly created the impression of a stone hitting the plate glass window. It scared most of the audience for real as much as the characters portrayed it on stage! This is followed shortly by a power failure. A staged one, not for real I hasten to add!

During this candlelit scene Christine tries to reassure Eva by asking her to tell them more about herself. She apparently works as a nanny to a Russian girl and continues to keep her job, despite Nick asking her to quit. Seems she doesn't quite believe Nick is as rich as he says he is. The group of friends go on to lay their lives bare; no secret is left unturned including the turmoil in Humphrey and Christine's private life. Eva too has secrets and by the light of a single candle tells the story of her childhood, the war in Croatia and how her family died. This is perhaps the most moving scene in the entire play and brings the friends back to a sobering reality. Each couple takes solace in themselves and finds the reconciliation they so longed for.

Now the outside world really has caught up with Nick. Shards of stage glass fall accompanied by a loud noise, the glass doorway has been smashed and torchlights pierce the now darkened lounge. Nick strides forward to confront the intruders and gives the audience another moment of pure magical drama. It sums up the entire play. You may not deserve what you get, but you get what you can for as long as you can.

When the power comes back on the party begins and we get to see Steven pretending to be a rock star. Nick hands Humphrey the Mark Knopfler guitar he has hanging on the lounge wall. This was a very different aspect to Steven's acting talents and one he executed well, much to the amusement of more than one person in the audience!