

The Owl and the Pussycat – Bill Manhoff
Esk Valley Theatre

The playwright's name may not be familiar and he has given his play the title of a children's nursery rhyme, but make no mistake, the Owl and Pussycat is a very adult comedy. Following the recent Private Lives, it may be that Director Mark Stratton is intent on establishing a reputation in Glaisdale for the kind of razor-sharp wit that depends on strong acting and convincing performances.

If you want to get a feel for what this revival of a 1960s American Classic is all about, try crossing The Odd Couple with Educating Rita. The Esk Valley Theatre production does not have the gloss of the 1970 Barbara Streisand/George Segal film of the same name, but it has sharper elbows.

Two, self-deluded, twenty somethings come together in a San Francisco apartment. He is a wannabe writer working in a book shop while she has ambitions to be a model and actor, but moonlights as a prostitute until the right opportunity comes along.

Sherman (Cornelius Geaney) has not even settled on his own name – is he Felix or the more prosaic Fred? Geaney is required to portray a man who thinks of himself as an intellectual in complete control of his emotions, but suddenly finds his moods swinging wildly between despair and euphoria. He frequently asserts that emotion is inappropriate for a man of his chosen calling.

The cause of this soul-stirring is the exasperating, fascinating, mercurial Doris W (Olivia Sloyan). She too has an indeterminate name and a fantasy life, but she is more grounded than Sherman. She has less development as a character, but feels somehow more solid as an individual. Sloyan's portrayal is something of a tour de force as she inhabits the stage and maintains a consistently plausible Brooklyn accent throughout.

The problem, and the humour, comes from the inability of Doris and Sherman to see themselves for what they are. Sherman's despair climaxes in a farcical scene where they discuss suicide, reject a number of options, but then both try to get their heads into the gas oven. Eventually, they come to an accommodation and we have hope for their future.

Esk Valley Theatre's stated aim is to bring high quality drama to the North Yorkshire area. The current tour will take them to some of our more remote villages, playing in some very small venues. Such a schedule means that they operate under certain restriction. For example, the set has to be simple enough to adapt to many different spaces and be easily transported.

However, rest assured, they make no compromises with their audience's sensibilities or intelligence.

The Owl and the Pussycat tours extensively around Yorkshire, Cleveland and Cumbria until 10th November.