



[Spring and Port Wine](#) at [Oldham Coliseum](#)

By Bill Naughton

Reviewed by John Waterhouse April 2017

This is a play in the tradition of Lancashire comedies, centred around family issues in close-knit surroundings but rather than the austere background of say *Hobson's choice*. Set around the turn of the last century,

**Spring and Port Wine**

puts the same familiar issues into a more modern setting, at the dawn of the swinging sixties.

The trouble is that in the house of Rafe Crompton, excellently played by **James Quinn**, there's not much swinging - or much else for that matter, where strict rules are reinforced with stern biblical quotations and high demands of honesty and morality. For me, Rafe could have maintained his dominant position without needing to resort to using the Bible as a weapon, which seemed more Victorian and 20th century, but otherwise there is a rounded portrait of a

suburban Northern family.

Whilst unquestionably a Northern comedy, **Spring and Port Wine** could have been set almost anywhere and though the issues are pertinent to a ration-book, deferential post-war Britain moving into the liberated, colourful 1960's, the underlying themes are perennial as each generation struggles to find its own identity and throw off traditions. However, rather than convey a sense of any underlying rebelliousness, the impression given is more of young people just wanting to be themselves, with Rafe hopelessly rooted in his own narrow rules.



The costuming captures well the growing generational rifts with Rafe's youngest daughter Hilda dancing onto the stage in a bright, short skirt and top in contrast to her parents' sombre, conservative fashions.

Tensions run deeper than just outward appearances as Kate, Rafe's older daughter considers the prospect of exchanging the patriarchy for marriage whilst her brothers Arthur and Harold try to make the best of their situations.

Although the premise may appear similar to the *Royle family*, this play actually has a lot of pace which grows as the plot develops. One of the pleasures of this production is the subtle changes in mood, starting as a light comedy, later shifting to both high drama and sentimentality, whilst on other occasions almost bordering on farce. It takes skill to effectively pull off these kind of changes and Director **Chris Honer** has done a superb job in achieving this.

The play is well cast with **Sam Lupton** and **Joseph Carter** almost doing a double act as Rafe's repressed sons Wilfred and Joseph, which

**Kate Dobson**

and

**Laura Dickenson**

give the two daughters Florence and Hilda very contrasting and distinctive personas. Special mention must be made of

**Karen Henthorn**

whose understated portrayal of Rafe's wife Daisy gives a very clear impression of the kind of subjugated, house-bound existence which was the lot of so many women at the time.

We see almost all the characters undergo profound changes with a very real tension created as the audience is held in suspense as to which ways they will jump. Outside of the family, Arthur (Florence's fiancé) shows that there are limitations to Rafe's influence on his children, culminating in a powerful exchange, whilst **Isabel Ford** as Betsy Jane presents a spirited contrast to her neighbour Daisy.

Most people will recognise at least something from their own family background in **Spring and Port Wine**

and whilst certainly not over-sentimental, it brings over much of the humanity than often lies beneath rigid outward appearances. There is a refreshingly optimistic outlook to this play, which brings over a good impression of life in the early sixties with the story being overtly tied to its setting. A very enjoyable two hours entertainment.

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**Spring and Port Wine is on until Saturday 29th April.**