The Actress by Peter Quilter
at Altrincham Little Theatre
Reviewed by John Waterhouse November 2017

Perhaps the best way to describe *The Actress* is a bitter sweet comedy. Set in the 1960's, it is also an observation as to how attitudes towards women in the theatre, and acting generally, have changed. The premise is Lydia Martin, a time-served, successful actress has decided to stop whilst she is ahead (and before her looks fade), by giving one final performance. That the performance in question is 'The Cherry Orchard' and her past successes include the likes of 'Hedda Gabler' suggest this is not actress who had traded primarily on her sex appeal to achieve success.

With Helen Mirren, Judi Dench or Maggi Smith seeming to find never-ending opportunities for older (often very 'older') women taking centre stage, it seems inconceivable today why a successful, serious actress should feel the need to hang up her acting boots.

The real bitter sweetness comes from not from Lydia's career but from her relationships. It is an open question whether her husband's philandering was largely the result of her over-dedication to acting, although from her daughter's testimony, there seems no doubt it impinged her ability to be a good mother. The play explores Lydia's relationships with several key people in her life, including her agent and dresser, as she prepares to leave everything to be with a very rich but seriously decrepit banker in Switzerland. But is it all just about money or is there a deep need to shut out everything that might remind her of the English theatre world once the final curtain has fallen? This question is well developed as deeper issues unfold.

Jane Newman as Lydia captures the essence of the self-obsessed prima donna trying to mask her inner vulnerabilities whilst **Malcombe Cooper** is excellent as her lecherous but still devoted, ex-husband. The couple still each have a strong sexual vibrancy and it seems a little incongruous that she is about to trade this for life with a man who has difficulty even breathing. **David Garner** certainly presents an amusingly decrepit man but for a Swiss citizen, he has a disturbingly English accent.
Charlie Welsh
as daughter Nicole exudes the sexy sixties in white boots and short turquoise dress, whilst seeming more grounded in reality than her mother, as does her stalwart dresser Katherine, played by
Barbara Steel
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Julie Broadbent exudes sympathy as the overworked and overlooked back-stage worker **Marg aret**
but there could have been more laughs generated from this character. Similarly
Katherine Fennell
as the agent Harriet, has all the lovey floweriness of a member of the London literary fraternity

but at times her character almost falls into a state of melodrama and herein lies the problem. *The Actress*
is an entertaining and at times, thought provoking play. It is also very funny in several places which means that the play often struggles to define itself.

This is a play which, with different writing, could have easily been turned into a farce like Michael Frayne's 'Noises Off', or alternatively made into a poignant drama akin to Ronald Harwood's 'The Dresser', both of which show the theatre world from a behind-the-scenes perspective, but in very different ways. *The Actress* does not have the consistency of comedy to be classed as a really funny play but has too many genuinely funny bits to be classed as a serious drama.

The Actress is well worth seeing, and Altrincham Little Theatre have done an excellent job in creating an Ayckbournesque split set, depicting both the theatre stage and the dressing room. The setting is very reminiscent of a time when there were a lot more theatres all over the country, with repertory company constantly touring and the cast do well in bringing that time alive again.

The Actress runs until 25th November 2017.