



## [Strangers on a Train](#)

at Opera House, Manchester

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) February 2018

Strangers On A Train is a novel by Patricia Highsmith which was quickly taken up and adapted for the screen by Alfred Hitchcock; and has now been adapted once again for a touring stage production which came to Manchester's Opera House this evening.

For those who are familiar with the Hitchcock version, then this play will undoubtedly come as somewhat of a let down. The characters are still similar and the basic premise of the story - two complete strangers meet on a trans-America train journey, and after a while cook up the plan to the perfect double murder. Each can do away with the other's 'problem' and give themselves an alibi for the time of the murder. Since they are strangers and therefore have 'never met', no-one will be able to connect them to either murder. But, and this is a big but, none of the suspense is there at all. Director **Anthony Banks** has somehow forgotten completely that this is a

suspenseful murder mystery thriller, and turned it into a family-friendly, and rather mundane play with extremely strange moments of comedy thrown in for no particular reason. Very disappointing, and lacking atmosphere.

However, that notwithstanding, the characterisations of the cast - even if not exactly what you would wish for - were played very solidly and it is obvious that they are indeed excellent actors.

### **Jack Ashton**

was Guy Haines, an architect and adulterer who wished beyond anything to rid himself of his wife so that he can build a huge leisure complex in California and marry his young, beautiful, but somewhat naive mistress. The problem here is that we really don't care about his predicament, and we see his adultery as a crime in itself and so feel little or no empathy with him when he descends, rather self-indulgently, into morose introverted territory in Act 2.

Playing opposite him as the playboy lush with psychotic tendencies, Charles Bruno, was **Chris Harper**

. We never liked Bruno right from the start and so his Greek Tragedy style punishment felt right for him, his descent into the hell of DTs, being found out by a dogged PI, and being deserted by his mother (of whom he had a weird kind of Oedipus Complex). Finally Guy's complete negating off him was excellently measured. Although I was struggling to like his rather annoying performance at first; it was only in retrospect could I see the through-line and character development which was cleverly portrayed.

Bruno's mother wouldn't have been out of place in a Tennessee Williams play, overplaying her hand slightly, **Helen Anderson** played a dotting, loving and somewhat suffocating mother, Elsie. Whilst **Hannah Tointon** played Guy's love interest and eventual wife Anne Faulkner. The naivety and giddiness of her initial portrayal did not belie the strength and dominant resolve of her final scene. There was little in between to give one any indication that the two were the same person, and so I found that a little hollow. And finally, coming

straight out of a Mike Hammer film set was Bruno's father's minder now turned PI who works out all the little clues and puts the murder jigsaw together, Arthur Gerard, played this evening with unerring sincerity and old school aplomb by

**John Middleton**

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The one thing which completely ruined the play for me though was the set. Designed by David Woodhead, it was a quasi-cinematic affair. We were presented with a flat screen across the stage which at the beginning showed the US flag turning to blood red. It looked good and had promise. However, as the panels moved for each scene to reveal the next set in a portion of the whole; sometimes central, sometime to the side or on a higher level, they were rather stubborn and would stick or make a noise. Sight-lines were also an issue as we could clearly see either side of these panels. Not only that but the predictability of this became wearisome, and we were glad of the total change of scene for the final denouement.

Running at 2 hours 40 minutes, it was too long for a play and felt too long too. With some judicious editing and more thoughtful and moody directing, this play may well be a hit; but in its present state, it is mediocre at best, despite the best efforts of some talented actors.