

THURSDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2013

The Tailors' Last Stand - review

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Barons Court Theatre, London

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Granddads are amazing. They might have been war heroes and freedom fighters, but stealing the guests' biscuits off the table is still on their list of priorities. It's that particular fondness reserved for elderly men, laced with respect and innocent fun, that *The Tailors' Last Stand* captures, telling the tale of four eighty-something communists having their last trade union meeting in an endearing and light fringe production.



The play goes off to a bad start, but lands back on its feet. Edmund Dehn makes a stiff entrance as Max, his uncertain performance adding to the audience's discomfort at sitting in the cramped, musty-smelling space of the Barons Court. The introduction of his co-stars, however, soon loosens his act and establishes a homey style of comedy that will accompany the audience throughout the piece. As Max and his three comrades bicker, reminisce, and complain to each other about their various ailments, spectators recognise themselves or their relatives, and look on the action with tender self-deprecation.

The scenery itself grows on you. Cleo Harris-Seaton's design comes across as frugal at first, the coffee table seeming too rickety and the seat cushions too worn out, but together with the paper plates and mismatched tea cups that make up the props, they become a very faithful rendition of a communist meeting hall. Director Harry Saks adapts his work to the space, using the thrust configuration and intimate setting to comic or dramatic effect. Of particular note is the hanging of the union's banner, which both introduces the all-important National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers and delights the audience by having Edmund Dehn and Richard Ward (Tom) go around in circles in a clumsy attempt at manoeuvring.

If the play's composing elements all abandon themselves to the action, the company appears reluctant to follow suit. The four actors lean so much on the stage directions as to make the blocking apparent. Richard Ward seems to be the only one allowing himself individual acting decisions, and Terry Jermyn and Tony Parkin's performances as George and Barney border on the mechanical. In any case, Ian Buckley's wonderful text amply compensates for any disagreement over acting choices, keeping the four men believable and relatable. His series of granddad jokes makes them lovable ("Is there a doctor in your family? -No. My granddaughter is a teacher. - Perfect, they're the best! - The best at what? - Pretending to be doctors!"), while the story of the long lost Rose fleshes them out, granting the audience a glimpse into a painful and complex past.