**Abigail’s Party by Mike Leigh: review by Paul Stammers**

Abigail’s Party harks from a different era. That’s not because of the flares, the lurid wallpaper or the quaffing of light ale. It’s not even the puffing away on copious cigarettes (which remain unlit here). No, the truly attention-grabbing line from this famous 1977 sitcom is the proud remark by gauche, giggly Angela that she and her computer technician hubby Tony have managed to bag their new home for only *£21,000*.

For anyone who wants to indulge in a spot of nostalgia, there’s plenty to savour in this excellent production, directed by Gareth Hammond – beginning with the background music, which is a treat from the outset. And the well-crafted set is testimony to the hard work put in by the design and build team led by Steve Ashcroft and Graham Diacon. But most of all, this satire focuses on the interactions of a group of people in a lounge, their aspirations and motivations.

All the cast – the smallest in the Players’ repertoire for many years – put in strong performances and seem to be enjoying themselves. Claire Crowther is an inspired choice as brassy, domineering and bored housewife Beverly, striking up a friendship with mousy neighbour Angela (Elaine Leggett, who easily segues from shy to drunkenly raucous). They make a fine double act, haranguing their respective henpecked husbands Laurence (Nick Smith, who quickly loses his estate agent swagger amid Beverly’s scathing putdowns) and the nearly-monosyllabic Tony (Ianto Wain). The latter is perhaps the most enjoyable character, with his gormless grin and frequent responses of ‘yeah …’

It’s not particularly complex stuff; much of the conversation is prompted by petty one-upmanship and social gaffes. And the dialogue dates from the years before political correctness – it’s now a bit awkward to hear adults chortling about cavorting with highly-sexed schoolgirls. ‘Me Too’ in this context is what the guests say when Beverly is pouring out the Bacardi.

However, it does get serious, starting with the arrival of prim divorcee Susan (Mary Fisher, making a confident debut with the Players). We never do see Abigail, Susan's daughter. But her party next door is a frequent talking point in the second act before a dramatic conclusion in which one of the characters' true feelings is revealed. For all the banal patter early on, ultimately the play revolves around social class, love and marriage. Oh, and pineapple on sticks …