

‘Farmhouse’ by John C. Gilmour ☆☆☆

Original play Farmhouse is the first fruit of a new playwright-mentoring scheme, run by veteran Edinburgh company Siege Perilous. And it’s a fascinating piece to kick off with – strong in concept, for all that it loses some momentum when it gets to the details.

Intelligent and well-conceived, the unfolding drama develops into an almost pagan vision of humanity’s connection with the land.

As the action begins, heavily-pregnant Claire and her charmless husband Anthony find themselves, uninvited, in widower Lachlan’s lonely farmhouse. The older man, estranged from his own children, is seeking a kind of redemption. It’s a scenario fraught with tension... and before the night is out, we find ourselves witnesses to a savage, Faustian deal.

Some of the plot devices are a little clumsy – the play even opens with that most-worn of clichés, a breakdown in the wilderness – but there’s plenty of intrigue around the ever-shifting balance of power. Claire’s own kindness triggers a series of events which soon escape her control, and the stranded travellers’ back-stories hold plenty of promise too. In the end, though, these individual narratives seemed oddly disconnected from the main thrust of the play. The strands aren’t quite bound together; the storyline makes sense, but I wasn’t left with that satisfying feeling that it could only have happened to these exact people, at this exact time.

The script might also benefit from a firmer editor’s hand. Some irrelevant details are laboured, and a few exchanges go on for a couple of lines too long – minor problems, to be sure, but ones which together conspire to dispel a little of the mood. More fundamentally, the characters show an irritating tendency to break into lengthy parables, which demand a level of engagement from the audience that hasn’t quite been earned. Despite committed performances (especially from Nick Cheales as the time-worn Lachlan), I found the early pace a little wearying.

Yet the opposite might be said of the final scenes, which pivot in an instant from the marginally creepy to the out-and-out deranged. In a post-show discussion, playwright John C Gilmour mounts a credible explanation for his lurch from naturalism to horror, pointing out that real-life violence is rarely foreshadowed with the clarity we expect in the theatre. It's a fair point, but the gambit doesn't really work. *Farmhouse's* gothic finale is nothing like real life; it's unashamedly the stuff of our darkest imagining, and without any preparation for what was to come, it just proved a bit too far-fetched to carry me along.

Director Andy Corelli delivers some clever, claustrophobic staging, which sees the audience in two groups facing each other on opposite sides of the farmhouse kitchen. It means the actors spend a fair amount of time with their backs to half the crowd; but this time, the risk pays off. The mere fact I was facing another audience member was mildly discomfiting, their gaze a reminder of my own intrusion into life on the isolated farm. And the physical proximity makes the most of a spotlight moment in Gilmour's script, when a befuddled Claire – hauntingly captured by actor Clare Ross – approaches us directly with a personal, unanswerable appeal.

There's a lot to admire about *Farmhouse*, not least Gilmour's willingness to push the boundaries of conventional structure. It's not as unsettling as it wants to be – but with a little more discipline in the earlier scenes, there's a genuinely chilling story waiting to come through. And let's not forget, this is the very first product of a scheme committed to discovering interesting new writing. In that aim, it certainly succeeds.