



Caroline Catz, Sandra Voe and Marjorie Yates are good but the pace does lag

Life is too short for this euthanasia black comedy

Theatre Ann Treneman

Curtains

Rose Theatre,
Kingston

★★★★☆



This is a black comedy that, as it carries on, gets blacker (and yes, such a thing is possible) and much less of a comedy. The family before us do not seem to have a surname, so I am giving them one. Meet the Grims. They are holding what may be the worst birthday party in the world for their 86-year-old mum (or grandma), Ida.

"We're having a LOVELY birthday, aren't we mum," shouts her daughter Margaret at the lump of a woman in a wheelchair. Margaret has given her mum a set of Marks & Spencer towels. ("So lovely, aren't they mum! Aren't you lucky mum!"). Margaret is in a panic because she used Dream Topping instead of real cream on the trifle.

It's the kind of party that could easily make anyone, not just Ida, with her chronic pain, contemplate euthanasia and this is indeed the subject of this 1988 play by Stephen Bill. I can see the logic of a revival, what with our ageing population etc, but here it is the play itself that is showing its age, particularly in the casual racism of that time. I can't

think why the director Lindsay Posner didn't ask for an update. At times the whole thing feels as dated as Ida's old-fashioned floral front room. Saskia Reeves is Katherine, the eldest daughter who, we learn after the party, has been begged by her mother to allow her to die. "You promised!" croaks Ida, played by Sandra Voe with perfect passive aggressive fury, after the party.

This moment of reckoning should be dramatic. Ida is too unwell to be able to eat anything, much less her own cake, and she is in terrible pain. Katherine, uptight and upright, feeling guilty for not visiting more often, looks stricken. But the moment falls flat, as we have no idea how deep their relationship actually goes.

It's the family, if not from hell, then certainly from down the road. Katherine has a know-it-all husband, Geoffrey (a bumptious Jonathan Coy). Margaret (a very good Wendy Nottingham) never stops talking and then there's her youngest sister, the wayward Susan (Caroline Catz). The neighbour (and carer) Mrs Jackson is the only one who really knows Ida.

The pace lags as everyone starts to argue about the morality of it all. It's all very TV movie meets sub-Agatha Christie. There is a good cast and an atmospheric set with Peter McKintosh's blast-from-the-past front room. But the last 20 minutes drag. It goes on, as life sometimes can do too, for far too long.

Box office: 020 8174 0090, to March 17

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