

PACK OF
LIES
1998

AMATEUR DRAMA AWARDS

Treachery in the suburbs



"GOOD ENOUGH to transfer to the West End", said a respected local producer. Her comment came after seeing Teddington Theatre Club's presentation of **Pack of Lies**.

In fact it was first seen five years ago with a strong West End cast. But although Hugh Whitemore's play is written on a broad canvas of treachery, its domestic focus is better suited to the suburban audience of Hampton Court Theatre.

In 1961 tranquil Ruislip made the world's headlines when Helen and Peter Kroger were arrested and later convicted of spying for the Russians. But the story is actually about their unremarkable opposite neighbours, the Jacksons, whose modest semi-detached in Cranley Drive was occupied for several weeks by a British

intelligence surveillance team.

Befriended by the Krogers, this happy family of three were to have their lives torn apart by the corrosive effects of betrayal and deceit. But most of the agony fell on the unwilling shoulders of Mrs Jackson, a suburban housewife fretting about her daughter's O levels and making endless trips to the local shops.

In this role Judi Dench overcame her West End aura with flat-heeled dowdiness and quiet resignation. But last week, in an absorbing central performance, Jennifer Tudor played Mrs Jackson as a strong-willed, vigorous woman finally bowing to the inevitable.

In his opening monologue Peter Sainty as Bob Jackson

set the tone of cosy contentment behind the privet hedges, soon to be shattered by the arrival of David Duff's ruthlessly silky man from the Special Branch.

But the play's real pain grows from Helen Kroger's frequent chummy visits. And her warm transatlantic ebullience and cheerful solicitude were beautifully captured by Sue Viney, making the later betrayal scenes almost unendurable. One longed for the audience to be spared Mrs Jackson's anguished meetings with her breezy unsuspecting neighbour.

And thanks to Mrs Viney, the obscene facts of Ethel Rosenberg's death were movingly recited without descent into melodrama.

Strong support came from Laurie Coombes and Tracey Muir as policewomen, John

Hocking as Peter Kroger, and Kristen Bowditch as the Jackson's teenage daughter. The reality of life in a Ruislip semi was ideally served by Derek Stuart's lovingly detailed setting (constructed by a host of helpers) with the houses opposite glimpsed through the Jackson's front window.

In recent years the work of Paul Lawrance (as director) and Peter Sainty has mostly been confined to short, sparsely-attended runs at the Kew Road Methodist Hall. This fine production, entered for the Richmond Arts Council amateur drama awards, played for a week to near capacity houses....a cause for real celebration.

John Thaxter