60 years ago, H E Bates wrote about the Larkins. Pop Larkin, who makes a fortune from scrap-iron deals but has never paid income tax, lives in rural idyllic bliss with generous-hearted Ma and their children. He continued to write about the Larkins and published several stories that were made into a TV series back in the 1980’s.

The story for his play tells of when a young, earnest tax official, Mr Charlton, turns up one hot May afternoon in 1957 to investigate the lack of tax return, he is bewitched immediately by eldest daughter Mariette. It isn't long before he succumbs to the boisterous Larkin family charm and largesse. Other friends and neighbours are included in the shenanigans including a gymkhana and a cocktail party.

At the South Holland Centre last week, I watched St Nicolas Players bring The Darling Buds Of May to life. A remarkable set was split in two parts, the interior of the Larkins home and the outside farm with live trees, assorted junk from Pop’s collection and furniture all looking just right for the period. The kitchen area was papered with what looked like original 1950’s wall paper, the kitchen itself was a triumph. Not to forget the working TV and radio, I congratulate Arline Evenden, Steve Underwood and Janet Staples for their attention to detail. I particularly liked the drinks cabinet which lit up and chimed every time Pop went to make his weird and wonderful cocktails from the ‘Guide to Better Drinking’. It must have been fun for Ma to portray a busy mother, feeding her brood, as the props and set added to the action at all times. I even noticed that Ma cut herbs for dinner from the tubs set by the kitchen door. It looked like an original 1950’s fridge and cupboard units, this attention to detail enhanced the action and made everything feel more realistic. I commend the set designer highly for their effort.

Pop Larkin played by Rob Nicholls was energetic, gregarious and portrayed the head of the Larkins family with passion and flare. He was hardly off stage, yet I never saw him faulter and his energy level remained high. There are not many actors in the professional theatre, let alone amateur theatre, who could have managed the level of physical technic and make it all so believable. His charming dancing, lovemaking and prat-falls bringing new dimension to the part. Ma, played so well by Jane Webb was unperturbed by Pop’s crazy stunts and the chemistry between them was excellent. Jane looked gorgeous in her outfits and her jolly laugh rang out delightfully. Her warmth and charisma charmed us all.

Pauline Jackson was played with immense stage presence by Matilda Hoyles-Simpson. The cat fight between Pauline and Mariette was very believable, blond hair flying, strawberries smeared all over place and the children urging them on. Excellent. Richard Slade as the faltering, nervous Mr Charlton was brilliant. His transformation from the bumbling beginnings, through his changing bronzed holiday body to his growing confidence as he learns to love his beautiful Mariette. Terrific! Other highlights include his drunken behaviour late at night in the kitchen and the almost kiss which ended in a fall were just hilarious. That whole scene was very well directed and played. The story line was complicated enough during that part of the play - with a full hand of cribbage, food eating, cocktail mixing, form filling, chair swapping, pyjama fitting and knitting enhanced by the lighting changes and sound effects. The acting was believable and superbly funny.

Exceptionally there was not a weak performance all evening. From the gentle and beleaguered Brigadier played by Jon Cooper, his first time on the stage I believe, to the overwhelmed Edith who’s passionate clinches with Pop had the audience laughing out loud. Other new members of St Nicolas Players included Jane Gabbutt, who’s charming performance of Angela Snow in her bright yellow outfit was just right for the part. Also Mark Bennett who played the Tax Inspector trying to stop Mr Charlton making a poor life decision. His performance was laboured at times, yet he looked really good in his driving jacket with slicked hair and clipped tones. With more experience I’m sure his acting skills will develop. His diction was very good however and I could hear every word. Jed Laxton and Arline Evenden gave measured confident performances as Lord and Lady Bluff-Gore bringing experienced characterisation and comedy with aplomb.

Overall I felt the efforts in costuming everyone in 1950’s attire was very hard to fault. I liked the attention to detail, gloves for some of the ladies, hats for the men. All bright summery colours. I think Mariette looked particularly charming after I got over the blond hair, having expected a Catherine-Zeta Jones look alike. Of course there was no need to worry, Alicia Tibbs performance of girly, pleasant politeness charmed not only Mr Charlton but the whole audience. The young members of the cast included Joseph Smith who I have seen on stage with the players before was wonderful. He was busy all evening with his stage sisters, Zoe Fell, Emelia and Mollie Bennett. Their interactions added more colour and depth to the story and were used to good effect to change scene’s and clear sets without the need to close the curtains which might have slowed everything down.

I read in the program that the sound effects of the birds, which included nightingales, blackbirds and robins were recorded not far from where H E Bates wrote his play. Such attention to detail by director Jules Jones is commendable. The detailing on the set, the layered sound effects, 1950’s music, the hair, make-up and even the sheer amount of effort which went into the food and drinks on stage, just astonishing. I look forward to seeing future production under her careful direction.

Tony Briggs