How a town rose again after murder

Having stormed the National Theatre, verbatim musical London Road is coming to the big screen, finds **Alex Bellotti**

For those involved in its original run at the National Theatre, the coverage surrounding the film adaptation of London Road must be a breath of fresh air.

Back in 2011, when the show premiered, there was a far greater amount of scepticism – to put it lightly – about the prospect of a verbatim-style musical about the Ipswich serial murders.

Fortunately, its accumulation of five star reviews quickly put an end to any accusations of cashing in on a tragedy.

"We entered into rehearsals with very much the press deciding that this was going to be a musical about murders and that it was bad taste, but they didn't know anything about it at the time," says Highgate actress Clare Burt, who has starred in both the show and film. "So when it became successful it was thrilling – we were just glad to get through it without being heckled."

Written by Hackney playwright Alecky Blythe and scored by composer Adam Cork, the film features all the cast and team of the original show, plus additional actors including Olivia Colman, Tom Hardy and Anita Dobson.

In cinemas from tomorrow, the story focuses on the residents of London Road – the street which housed Steve Wright, who killed five Ipswich prostitutes in late 2006. As national media descends upon the area, Wright's neighbours are left to struggle with the aftermath while trying to rebuild their shell-shocked community.

Blythe – whose last show Little Revolution debuted at the Almeida Theatre last year – created the script by whittling down over 100 hours of interviews with residents conducted over two and a half years.

■ **Above: A scene from London Road. Inset: Adam Cork and Alecky Blythe** *(Picture: Idil Sukan)*

"I think they wanted to talk to me because my line of questioning was different to other press they'd been having," she explains. "I wasn't asking them about the private life of the (murdered) girls or Steve Wright, I was asking them, 'What's it like for you to have lived through this?' or, 'What are you now doing about it?'

London Road's originality comes from applying Blythe's trademark verbatim style – which sees actors reciting the speech of real interviewees, down to the last stutter – to a musical context.

Her collaboration with Cork came during a National Theatre workshop. The composer admits he was initially "flummoxed" by the prospect of adapting normal speech into melody, but after further discussion realised they had found something "experimental in its ambition, but with the potential to really land with a theatre audience".

How will it land with film audiences though?

"I find the film more emotional," says Blythe, and Cork agrees. "The screen is a way into storytelling that we're all much more used to than the stage, because we've been watching telly all our lives here in 2015," he says.

"I suppose the language of documentary is something that lends itself more to the screen than to the stage for a starting point. In some songs – Ten Weeks for example – I've used the language of TV documentary and pathetique-style piano accompaniment, which was totally different from the stage show, which was more demonstrative."

Alongside a reworked script and reworked music, the nature of cinema meant that cast members couldn't play multiple characters as they did on stage, so more actors were required.

For Burt – who in the film plays a member of a neighbourhood committee – this led to a curious twist of fate as her daughter, Eloise Laurence, was cast to assume a character she originally played in the show.

"It was very lovely to be doing it with her," Burt says, explaining that her other daughter, Eva, also featured as director Rufus Norris encouraged family of the cast to get involved.

What was it like also sharing a scene with Tom Hardy? "He was fantastic. For a singer to be able to do this stuff is hard and he'd say he wasn't a singer, but my god he is."

Of course the heart of the story is in the community it depicts, and Burt believes the film holds up a mirror to how we would react in our own lives. "The whole town didn't know what to do and they were thrust into the limelight in the most horrific scenario. I suspect it might throw up an awful lot of questions were you or I thrust into the same situation.

"What I know that they were all united in feeling was happiness that they had become a community again. In fact all of the residents gave permission for their interviews to be used and they've all seen a screening of it and loved it."

Blythe concurs: "On paper it's a difficult sell, but as with the show the film's not about the murders, not about the women; it doesn't sensationalise Steve Wright in any way. The focus is still very much on the community and how they came together and healed themselves over the next couple of years.

"The show and plot of the film is adding to that glue, if you like, that binds them in terms of that shared experience."

■ **London Road is on general release tomorrow (June 12). Visit londonroadfilm.co.uk. For our review, turn to page six.**

A poignant take on a post-apocalytic world

WAITING FOR GODOT
BARBICAN
★★★★☆

The Sydney Theatre Company team had an appropriately Beckettian experience while mounting this new production: the first few weeks of rehearsal were spent waiting for a director who never appeared. Company director Andrew Upton eventually took over from absent Tamás Ascher, working within the set Ascher had developed with designer Zsolt Khell.

That set places the action of Beckett's 1953 absurdist classic in the disused theatre of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, populated with gravestone-esque blasted tree stumps and the eerily monumental lone tree. Khell's striking devastation isn't quite in tune with the production itself, which tends towards a wryly laconic form of fatalism.

Central pair Hugo Weaving and Richard Roxburgh's easy chemistry makes the enduring relationship convincing, but its warmth favours the Laurel and Hardy vaudevillian clowning, not the existential futility beneath their hijinks. Weaving's elegant Vladimir and Roxburgh's placid Estragon also function more as an appealing bromantic unit, rather than distinct and occasionally unhealthy co-dependents.

Thankfully, the supporting duo adds a darker dimension with their otherworldly physicality. Philip Quast, puffing out his expansive midsection and booming commands, overcompensates frantically playing the part of dominant Pozzo, while Luke Mullins' spectral Lucky is both broken slave – wheezing bodily, surreal forced dance steps, resting in a gravity-defying lean – and powerful force. His monologue, delivered with bravura precision, is memorably chilling.

Nick Schlieper's intelligent lightning design bathes the Barbican stage in remorselessly bright steel and then plunges us into shadowy blue when night falls. Upton's studied production as a whole doesn't quite plumb the same depths, but there are moments honouring the play's strange horror and desperate loneliness, and it offers a robust reminder of the emotional bonds and comic diversion humanity craves to fill the void.

Marianka Swain

■ **Hugo Weaving and Richard Roxburgh in Waiting for Godot.** *Picture: Alastair Muir*