

Pack of Lies

Amateur Players of Sherborne

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Date seen: 7 March 2026

Director: Adrian Harding

Pack of Lies is a play which takes a very interesting and challenging angle; it looks at the true story of the surveillance and arrest of the Kroger couple in 1960 not from their own point of view but from that of their Ruislip neighbours, the Jacksons (the Search family in real life) who know them only as their friends across the road. An international spying conspiracy of the Cold War is seen through the lens of ordinary suburban lives and the play explores themes of trust and deceit – between government officials and citizens, between neighbours, and within the family.

Portraying this convincingly and engagingly for a theatre audience, the ordinariness of the lives and then the huge emotional impact when secrets and lies are revealed, offers a big challenge for a drama company. APS succeeded magnificently, delivering a strong production all round with many strengths, and with three great strengths in particular: a wonderfully realistic set, a strong and clear vision followed through with clear and assured direction, and great, very believable acting performances.

The set (design by John Crabtree) presenting the kitchen and sitting room of the Jackson family, was superb. The period look and feel was just right (memories of my 1960s childhood!) with the kitchen having a very impressive green colour scheme throughout. The period oven was particularly striking and the sound effect of gas when the hob was lit to boil a kettle of water was a lovely touch. The kitchen door had a reassuringly firm ‘clunk’ as it was closed and the outside viewed through it was neatly achieved with a brick wall effect on flats. The sitting room, complete with staircase, was also well-realised and the lighting switch from one room to the other worked perfectly as the action moved between the two rooms – lighting design by Adrian Hole. A technical highlight for me was the lighting effect for the sitting room at Christmas: a warm yellow glow with wall lights illuminated as well as the ceiling light and the Christmas tree decorated with lights that had just the same soft, warm tone that I remember from my family’s Christmas tree in the early 1960s.

The Sound design and operation by Mark Lambert also added significantly to the atmosphere with period popular songs such as the very appropriate The Great Pretender which closed the first half; the sonorous, serious background music played during Peter Kroger’s second monologue and the choral music played during one of Barbara Jackson’s monologues. The way the music switched at one point in the play from the stage speakers to coming from the Jackson’s radio was a neatly done.

The excellent Direction by Adrian Harding took the bold and effective decision to play three of the central characters (Bob Jackson, Barbara Jackson and Stewart) low-key (although Julie Jackson had flashes of frustration and anger at times) which felt refreshingly realistic, devoid of ‘theatricality’. The contrasting tones of the play, generated by the characters and their conflicting motives, as well as by the general

pacing, were well brought-out: the exuberant Krogers compared with the restrained Jacksons, feisty teenager Julie contrasting with her concerned parents, the professionalism of Stewart, Sally and Thelma in their roles as MI5 officers compared with the emotions of the other five characters, and the 'spotlight' effect of the individual monologues, their interiority, compared with the exteriority of the general dramatic action. The Director kept the pace flowing, including the moves from kitchen to the sitting room and vice versa, and the audience were gripped throughout, totally immersed and involved in the story, so that when Helen Kroger knocked at the door of the Jacksons' house towards the end, more than one audience member said out loud, with feeling and tension, 'it's the Krogers'.

All of the characters played an important part in developing the story, maintaining the atmosphere of the play, the feel of 'ordinariness' amid the drama of the espionage, and in elucidating the play's emotional dynamics: the relationship between the Jacksons and the MI5 officers, the relationship between the Jacksons and the Krogers, the relationship between Bob and Barbara Jackson and their relationship with their daughter Julie; and all of these characters were well-played. The two MI5 officers assisting Stewart not only displayed very effectively their individual characters but also showed well that they were playing a role in their work capacity, that they were not always being 'straight' with the Jacksons. Sally (Samantha Elgar) was very good as a calm, composed and self-controlled Security Service officer, contrasting to some extent with the more chatty Thelma (Alison Maynard-Griffin) who was played with energy and clarity and whose casual chat about film stars over cups of tea with Barbara set up nicely the awkward cover-up required by Barbara when Helen came in immediately afterwards, leading to Barbara's subsequent angry outburst of 'leave me alone' to Thelma when she came back downstairs.

As the excellent programme explained, the story was inspired by the recollections of the Jacksons' daughter Julie (Hazell Parrett) whose real name was Gay Search and whose role in the play was both crucial and very well played. She hit just the right notes in portraying a teenager with attitude, as for example when her parents caught her out having been riding on her boyfriend's motorbike and her shock at the end of the play when told by Stewart about the Krogers' espionage activities was spot-on, showing us in the raw her feelings of betrayal.

Helen Kroger (Hilary Quinlan) packed a punch with bags of energy and a very good American accent; a whirlwind having entered the lives of the considerably more subdued Jacksons, as exemplified by the delightful scene with Barbara in which she enthused about all the attractive young men she imagined meeting on Bondi Beach when she and her husband moved to Australia. This emotional contrast required accomplished acting, which was also demonstrated in her speech on Christmas Day with the Jacksons about her Christmases as a child in the USA with her aunt Sophie and in her subtly delivered monologue to the audience about leaving New York following the arrest of the Rosenbergs.

Peter Kroger (Richard Culham) lit up the stage with his energy and jolly bonhomie and his two monologues were superb; the first calm and reflective, about their first meeting with the Jacksons, the second – about his conversion to Communism in New York in the 1930s – full of passion and earnestness, seething with anger.

Mr and Mrs Jackson and Stewart gave tour de force performances. Bob Jackson (Peter Sangston) showed his quality and set the tone for the play from the start with his brilliant low-key introduction, followed by the wonderfully naturalistic way he simply sat at the kitchen table and read the newspaper. The script for this character is sparse, it gives the actor little to 'chew on', as it were, emotionally, but in this production the actor fully realised he character and gave him emotional depth and credibility. He spoke softly, naturally; the audience could hear every word clearly and were fascinated, both when he was speaking and when he wasn't. When his wife became angry with Stewart about the imminent arrest of the Krogers, Bob stood behind her and said very little but his quiet, steady presence, his facial expressions and body language, spoke volumes.

Stewart (Robert Brydges) gave an equally assured, calm, professional-standard performance; he presented perfectly both the surface-level reliability and trustworthiness of the Intelligence Officer and his underlying deviousness. The scene where Stewart first talked with the Jackson family was excellent and riveting – the audience were gripped and you could hear a pin drop. At one point in the play Stewart gave a long description about the life of the head of the KGB and his delivery made it fascinating. Another highlight was when Stewart interviewed Bob and Barbara Jackson about what they knew about the Krogers. It was very low key, very convincing and very effective.

Barbara Jackson (Sarah Webster), too, was very convincing, at first bewildered then increasingly angry as the various machinations are revealed. It was a great performance with a range of moods subtly portrayed. I found her chats with Helen Kroger particularly impressive, so believable, and her two monologues to the audience, one about the Sunday morning when she and Thelma saw the man in the photograph shown to her by Stewart, the other about her mother-in-law who never wanted to make a fuss, were superb. Another highlight of the play was her speech to Thelma in which she gradually reveals her feelings about having been drawn into the web, the pack, of lies; her hurt, grief and anger.

Congratulations go also to the period Costume (Helen Smith) and to the Front of House team – warm and welcoming as always with APS. Well done to all and thank you for a wonderful performance.

Martin Stephen
NODA South West Representative, District 11