

## **Pack of Lies by Hugh Whitemore**

Amateur Players of Sherborne  
Sherborne Studio Theatre, Sherborne  
Saturday 14th March 2026

### Introduction

I was unfamiliar with this play and so was interested to see how it would unfold on stage. Nor had I been to the Sherborne Studio Theatre, so this was a pleasure on both counts - an engaging play and a striking setting. The challenge of such a play is the balance and release of tension and this was well achieved. The atmosphere was effectively created and the light relief subtle, and both combined to result in an interesting and very enjoyable production.

### Presentation

This production was well presented, featuring a carefully considered set that reflected a careful attention to detail. Every element of the staging—from the period-accurate saucepans and light switches to the overhead lighting—felt intentional. The clear demarcation between the kitchen and living areas was particularly effective, providing a layout that supported both the physical action and the play's pace.

The lighting design worked double duty, subtly marking the passage of time while heightening the play's inherent tension; the use of stark blackouts effectively punctuated the plot's more life-altering moments. This was complemented by a thoughtful soundscape; off-stage sound effects, such as the roar of Thelma's motorbike, rain and bird sounds, successfully expanded the world beyond the set. While the costumes generally captured the essence of the characters—such as the contrast between Barbara's drab, sensible attire and Helen's flamboyant flair—Julie's wardrobe occasionally felt a touch too modern, creating a slight stylistic disconnect with the established era.

Ultimately, these minor stylistic inconsistencies did little to detract from an otherwise strong presentation. The technical cohesion and thoughtful world-building resulted in a visually rich production that grounded the drama in a tangible, lived-in reality.

### Direction –

The direction of this production was marked by a clear commitment to period realism and atmospheric tension. It established a lived-in domesticity, utilising the meticulously detailed set to ground the drama.

There was a flow and cohesion which prevented the monologues from disrupting the drama and ensured that the pace was maintained throughout. By leaning into the stoic, grounded nature of the Jacksons and the flamboyant energy of the Krogers, the production effectively illustrated how easily a good front can be deceptive when portrayed by charismatic criminals. Such a small stage is always a challenge and there were several instances where actors delivered lines upstage which can seem a natural movement, but can be distracting for the audience and lines can be lost. Nonetheless this did not disrupt the audience experience to a great extent. The pacing was well-handled; the use of sharp blackouts and atmospheric lighting to punctuate life-changing plot points showed a keen understanding of how to build and release dramatic pressure. Furthermore, the decision to use

smaller techniques—such as the specific use of props like Stewart’s glasses—added a sophisticated layer of characterisation that felt both intentional and rewarding.

Ultimately, the direction provided a solid, engaging framework for the drama, successfully navigating the transition from a cozy domestic comedy to a heart-rending finale and ensuring that the play’s emotional core remained intact and moving.

## Acting

### Barbara Jackson played by Sarah Webster

Your portrayal of Barbara was one of understated complexity. You navigated the character’s internal contradictions with remarkable ease, presenting a woman who was at once sternly stoic and deeply, authentically warm. You also excelled in the quieter moments, capturing a naturalistic maternal energy that grounded the production’s domestic reality. What made the performance particularly compelling was the natural balance you struck between Barbara’s steely resolve and her underlying timidity. She portrayed a woman of strong will who was simultaneously plagued by a timid uncertainty, particularly when navigating the social whirlwind of her friend, Helen. Your body language conveyed this dynamic very well; the clear affection for Helen was always evident, yet you remained visibly overwhelmed by Helen’s more dominant personality. It was a subtle, human performance that felt less like theatre and more like a window into a lived-in life. Very well done.

### Bob Jackson played by Peter Sangston

This was a grounded performance as Bob, serving as the play’s emotional anchor. Projecting the image of a contented family man, you established a solid presence that made the Jacksons' home feel genuinely warm and lived-in. Your portrayal of Bob’s affection for Barbara was understated yet profound, providing a necessary calm contrast to her escalating anxiety. You maintained a stoic sense of duty even as the narrative tension mounted. Your interactions with the detective were well handled, managing to appear visibly on edge without losing the inherent dignity of the character. This carefully built restraint made the final scene all the more impactful. The transition from a pillar of strength to a man confronted by heartbreak was heart-rending and beautifully executed, leaving the audience with a powerful sense of personal loss. Nicely done.

### Julie Jackson played by Hazel Parrett

This portrayal was marked by a sense of naturalism and vocal projection, ensuring Julie’s presence was felt even in the play’s more crowded sequences. You were particularly effective at conveying Julie’s teenage behaviour subtly such as her sulkiness, a trait that felt authentically rooted in her age rather than a caricature. Your physical acting added to the subtleties of the play; your visible unease in the presence of the detective—showing in a restless uncertainty about where to sit or stand— was well contrasted with youthful, naive excitement regarding the investigation. In addition, your reactive acting served as a vital barometer for the family’s shifting dynamics. The response to Barbara’s rare display of temper silently communicated to the audience that such outbursts were entirely out of character for the household. You closed the performance with admirable restraint; by keeping Julie’s final emotions in check, you avoided the trap of melodrama, ensuring the play’s ‘plot twist’ remained grounded and profoundly believable. Well done.

### Stewart played by Robert Brydges

You brought a lovely sense of quiet assurance to the role of Stewart, embodying a character defined by his intellect and calculated confidence. You avoided the clichés of the aggressive investigator, opting instead for a casual assuredness that made his presence all the more unsettling for the Jackson family. You moved through the play with a mildly patronising pleasantness, a stylistic choice that heightened the power imbalance on stage. Your use of props was an effective technique. The integration of Stewart's glasses—frequently perched at the end of his nose—served as a visual shorthand for Stewart's sense of superiority, allowing him to literally and figuratively look down on the family. Furthermore, the monologues acted as a bridge between the narrative and the audience; his reporting on the case maintained a compelling storytelling quality. The portrayal of Stewart's mounting frustration was also well done; you kept this emotion subtle and controlled, letting it simmer beneath the surface just enough to be evident to the audience while maintaining the character's professional veneer. Very well done.

### Helen Kroger played by Hilary Quinlan

You brought a vibrant energy to the role of Helen, successfully capturing the flamboyant essence of the character. You leaned into Helen's seemingly light-hearted, blase approach to life, a choice that proved vital for the production's emotional stakes. By portraying Helen with such infectious charm, you effectively enhanced the audience's sympathy for Barbara; we were able to see exactly how someone could be so thoroughly deceived by such an engaging personality. However, there were noticeable inconsistencies with the character's accent, which occasionally wavered, and some dialogue was almost lost when delivered upstage, momentarily distancing the audience from the character's perspective. Despite these minor vocal and blocking moments you navigated the character's social charisma well, ensuring that the betrayal, when it finally surfaced, felt like a genuine blow to the household you had so effortlessly charmed. Well done.

### Peter Kroger played by Richard Culham

You brought a strong yet gentle stage presence to the role of seemingly ineffective Peter Kroger, establishing a character who felt both affable and deeply layered. You excelled at portraying the friendly neighbor, providing a warm—if occasionally weary—counterpoint to his wife's more erratic energy. Your attempts to keep Helen in check were played with a subtle, lived-in frustration that added a touch of domestic realism to their partnership, making his frequent lack of success both relatable and humorous. While this performance suffered from some of the same accent inconsistencies noted elsewhere in the production, your natural charisma ensured you never lost your hold on the audience. This was most evident during your extended monologue, handling this solo sequence with a very engaging sincerity, drawing the audience into the character's perspective and momentarily masking the darker undercurrents of the plot. Your ability to capture the room's attention during these quieter, more reflective moments grounded the character, making the eventual revelations surrounding the Krogers all the more jarring. Well done.

### Thelma played by Alison Maynard-Griffin

This was a very effective portrayal of the light-hearted and spirited Thelma. You portrayed the character's outsider perspective, particularly in Thelma's observations of the Jackson family's domestic life. You managed the delicate task of laughing at the Jacksons' daily attempts to maintain a good front with a genuine, underlying warmth—ensuring Thelma's amusement felt like the kindly

ribbing of a close friend rather than a cruel critique. This nuanced approach was vital to the play's atmosphere; by finding the humor in the Jacksons' situation, you helped humanise their struggle. Your performance served to ground the plot and create the sense of the investigation becoming a recognisable, everyday reality. Even in your shorter appearances, your natural and impeccable timing ensured that Thelma felt like a fully realized part of the Jacksons' world. Nicely done.

#### Sally played by Samantha Elgar

Despite being a minor role, this was essential in maintaining the sense of the constant police presence in the Jackson household. This was well portrayed in your presence on stage while not being intrusive, it could not be missed, reflecting the disruption in the family home. Small, yet vital and effectively played. Well done

#### Conclusion

I enjoyed this very much. A very well done to all. Thank you for inviting me, for the warm welcome - and for the pleasure of Jilly's company throughout - and for a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Dr Niamh McGrogan  
Somerset Fellowship of Drama – Phoebe Rees Competition