

THEATRE

Two Women

Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London

Prison, you might think, is a great leveller. No matter what your social background, bash your old man with a claw hammer or run him through with a kitchen knife and you find yourself sharing a cell in Holloway prison. But one of the points of Martina Cole's crime novel, here adapted for stage, is that though the women of the title have both killed their husbands, their reasons for doing so and their ability to handle their situation differ enormously.

Matilda is an articulate, middle-class woman who can persuade prison officers to bring her vodka and understands that "it's not enough to be the victim, you have to look like a victim" to be heard. Susan is a battered wife from the East End who has no idea how to play the system. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Susan, in fact, has the stronger case for appeal and that Matilda is not as harmless as she seems. Though it makes a social point, this is a weakness in the story, certainly as it appears on stage. Matilda is too thinly drawn and the positions of the women are too obviously polarised.

But in its telling of Susan's story, the play grips, illustrating why Cole is such a popular writer. Patrick Prior's adaptation whisks us back to Susan's first intimate encounter with her husband Barry. He woos her with a bag of chips, but it's clear that what he really wants is leverage over her creepy criminal father. The wedding is colourful – Barry has a brawl in the church and beds the bridesmaid at the reception – and it is all downhill from there, really.

The play is not subtle, the men are underwritten and the smaller parts are two-dimensional. But it has drive, heart and a great central character in Susan. Cathy Murphy, in Ryan Romain's production, makes her a person of warmth, integrity and grit. There's a fine performance too from Sally Oliver as Barry's mistress, and from Alison Newman as a tough-talking, big-hearted neighbour. Cole celebrates these strong, resilient women and they keep the show on the road – on stage, as in life. ★★★★★

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