

Love, life and crap relationships are in the spotlight for this hundredth production from Stratford drama group Second Thoughts.

Written, performed and directed by group founder member Steve Farr, it features just one other actor, Lucinda Toomey, and is to be the last play performed in the round at the Bear Pit before they get new seating.

The play opens on New Year's Eve; couple Lisa and Michael stagger in after a party, she dressed as a pirate, he in gawdy party suit, including neon flashing hat. Their jolly attire contrasts with their mood: downbeat and questioning their relationship. During the following scenes, we are taken on an episodic tour of their past relationships: in the first act we see Lisa through the years with four significant others. In the second act, following the interval, six of Michael's loves are presented.

The relationships are shown as incredibly dysfunctional. Lisa's include dates with a scared virgin, cheese-obsessed Michael Jackson freak, a wannabe poet who's really a hopeless drug addict, and a creepy bully.

Michael's parade of doomed partners include a heartless smartass, a kinky sex fan, mismatched internet date, a violent abuser, and a gossiping chav.

At times the depictions are hilarious — during Sex Game in the second act, the two characters don horses' heads and attempt a bondage session but Michael fails to take it seriously, much to the annoyance of his pervier partner. Other scenarios are profoundly disturbing: abusers spit and swear, and in one terrible moment Michael is branded with a hot iron.

Retro music and wardrobe are used to cast the two characters back in time, and once you accept that imaginative leap, the production is a compelling and highly original piece of drama.

Both the actors give brave performances, raw emotions spill over as the intimate portrayals of couples at love and war inevitably plumb vulnerable depths. However, the parade of characters would have benefitted from sharper differentiation. A hard call obviously, as playing six or so people convincingly and with such rapidity would challenge even professional actors.

One of the most striking depictions of Michael's relationships include him singing Can't Take My Eyes Off You with 'Sally-Ann' in the scene Too Good to be True. He sings beautifully, but when she joins in she's as croaky as an old toad. She then sings beautifully, and when he joins in he is out of tune. The message is simple and succinct: they make beautiful music but not together. This was more poignant than some of the lengthier scenes. At well over two hours the production did feel like it could have done with a touch of judicious editing.

Most of us have probably endured all sorts of rubbish relationships, and Sparrows in a Hat brilliant conjures the struggle we face in finding 'the one', with all the funny and

terrible pitfalls that that involves.

At the play's end, the two protagonists conclude that their relationship isn't so bad, and they are two happyish sparrows in a hat. Hardly a fairytale-style happy ever after, but one full of thoughtfulness that left the rest of us sparrows pondering our own romantic destinies.