

**The Space Race comes to Didcot**  
**by Bridget Haffenden**

Oxford Playhouse's production of 'One Small Step' is a witty and engaging comedy based on the space race of the 1950s and 60s between the Soviet Union and the United States. During the performance each of the actors, Robin Hemmings and Oliver Hollis, convincingly assumed the persona of many characters.

Written by David Hastings, the play opens with the launch of the Sputnik in 1957 and ends with the splashdown of Apollo 11 in 1969. It portrays nation determined to outdo nation, and the vital importance to both the Soviets and to the Americans of being ahead in the race. But it also reminds us, the audience, of just how remarkable and momentous each step in that race was; not least of which were the spectacular televised pictures of the moon landing and of man walking on the moon, which captivated and amazed people around the world.

The set was simple yet intriguing. A Nat King Cole song signalled the start of the play, giving the audience an indication of the period. Two or three piles of apparently unrelated every-day objects were quickly apparent, and these were employed so imaginatively as props that it was easy to view the inflatable striped beach ball as Sputnik, a thermos flask as spacecraft docking or a cardboard box, complete with armholes, as an astronaut's oxygen backpack. In general the lighting was fairly soft but the occasional use of a desk lamp, head swivelled to create a very contained spotlight, created an atmospheric sense of tension and concentration. At certain points between scenes the stage was left in complete darkness as one of the actors reached up to switch off a bare light bulb, suspended on a thin flex within arm's reach.

Our first sight of the actors, in identical costume, was accompanied by hearing them making 'whooshing' noises, just like little boys playing at rockets and spaceships. After quickly whipping off a sheet covering some of the props and projecting an image of the moon onto it, they immediately transformed into Soviet scientists, complete with accents, which was very entertaining and made me curious to see what would happen next. The varied props were used with great effectiveness throughout by the two actors, and these aided their assured portrayal of each of the characters; cushion pads were rapidly formed into triangular hats for the Soviet scientists, Walter Cronkite appeared immediately a pair of black-rimmed spectacles was donned and the American boffins and astronauts were identified by their cheesy smiles and effusive gestures. Employing humour and gravity, lightning-quick changes of costume and mood and with a shared ability to switch easily and fluently between characters and accents, these two actors entirely captured the imagination.

'One Small Step' puts both scientific and historic detail into a light-hearted, informative and entertaining format, suitable for all but the youngest child, and portrays a true story that would have been considered the stuff of science fiction a generation earlier. Just as important is the message that the human race continues to strive to achieve the apparently impossible. I was quite mistaken in not altogether expecting to enjoy this production: one should neither ignore nor forget the importance of keeping an open mind and being prepared to give things a try.