

Habeas Corpus

A play by Alan Bennett
Performed in November 1998 at Faringdon School

Characters (but not the players) caught with their trousers down

FARCE is a theatrical medium which can easily catch an amateur group with its trousers down. It is never as easy as it looks.

But in the case of Faringdon Dramatic Society's attempt at an early Alan Bennett comedy, *Habeas Corpus*, the audience's unrestrained response was evidence enough that the essential pace and timing was about right. It also showed at Bennett's funniest lines of dialogue, in what is essentially a kind of thinking man's farce, were being given plenty of space to develop. I suppose it is a way of saying how well director Jo Webster and her team did their job - but one can't help thinking that this play was almost written with the Faringdon players already cast.... Those who were in the audience will understand my careful choice of words when I suggest that it was the stature of such actors as Dave Headey, Sarah Varnom and Paul Garratt that made this such a visually entertaining production, as well as being witty and not a little saucy.

Not to put too fine a point on it, this early Bennett (set in the permissive 70s) is all about the obsession with sex taken to ludicrous, and hence farcical lengths. Thus, Tim Reeves was the womanising (patientising?) Dr Arthur Wicksteed, while it fell to the monumental talents of Sarah Varnom to squeeze every ounce of comedy out of his sex-starved wife,

And the double act developed by him with the vertically unchallenged Paul Garratt, as the sexually uncertain Canon Throbbing, must surely be a star turn to inspire some future pantomime casting? It would be most ungallant to suggest that Lucy Walden was well cast - it was surely sheer acting talent that gave us so much innocent fun at her expense, in the role of the mammiferously-challenged Constance Wicksteed.

Carole Tappenden brought a nice measure of Thatcherish imperiousness to the part of Lady Rumpers to match the light touch of Karen Pearce whose shedding of clothes was altogether more attractive, though not half so funny, as that of Roger Leitch as Mr Shanks the photographer from the false bosoms company - whose deadpan delivery, not to mention trouserless demeanour, was a perfect foil for the predatory advances of Muriel and the syringe-wielding Sir Gary Thompson was remarkably consistent with his portrayal of the droopy, hypochondriac Dennis Wicksteed (who is the only one actually to 'score', it appears) and Theresa Moon was faultless as the cleaning lady, Mrs Swabb, who keeps the whole plot moving with her droll commentary on the goings-on around her. We shouldn't really laugh... but the suicidal tendencies of Wicksteed's chronically depressed patient Mr Purdue gave David

Muriel

It fell to Dave Headey to play shamelessly to the audience, and be damned about the obvious likeness of his presence to that of the vertically-challenged Sir Percy Shorter.

Campbell the opportunity to produce a nicely-understated cameo part.

I.S

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