

Faringdon Folly

Earnest was important -another FDS success

WELL, yet again Faringdon has conspired to take my prejudices and march them out of town at the end of a big, pointy stick. Last time it was reggae, this time it's amateur dramatics.

'Am Dram' means many things to many people. To my (now) ever lasting shame it meant overly enunciating theses, wobbly scenery and pregnant silences whilst the cast racked their brains for the right line. To put it simply, I always assumed that amateur dramatics was ... well, something that you never admitted to, like seal clubbing or listening to James Blunt.

So, it was with a certain swaggering confidence that I approached the recent production of Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' by the Faringdon Dramatic Society. I knew what to expect, or thought I did.

What I actually got was a set of actors who could actually inhabit their roles and make their characters come alive. I'm sure there are some critics who say that Wilde's genius makes it pretty much impossible to turn in a bad performance of this play, but I would disagree. The fact that Earnest is so well written and observed probably makes it harder for anyone stepping into the skin of Algie, Jack, Lady Bracknell et al – as any mistakes or imperfections are always going to be laid at the feet of the actors playing them, rather than the playwright.

Earnest of course relies on the conceit that Victorian high society was inhabited by a set of ludicrously self-absorbed dandies, and it is a belief that was firmly held in place by the two leading men. Daniel Lander and Adrian Wells give us an Algie and Jack that are not only believable in their upper class pomposity, but drawn skilfully enough for both to retain their differences. Special mention should probably go to Landers here, as his reincarnation of the feckless, self-satisfied and slightly shifty Algernon could have come straight from the West End. While the whole cast was peerless in its ability to keep the audience firmly rooted in the late 1890s, another notable performance was that of Sarah Varnom, who managed to portray the battle axe-like Lady Bracknell without resorting to parody. Even though her lines are among the funniest, Varnom managed to raise laughs through her deft performance, just as much as the dialogue she delivered.

The cast's professionalism was mirrored by the production as a whole, from the on-stage scenery – which was changed effortlessly with each of the three acts – through to the sound effects and direction. The Faringdon Dramatic Society gave us a performance of such confidence and poise that I completely forgot that I was sat in the hall of the junior school on a wet Saturday night.

Among all of the things that I've not really understood since I moved to Faringdon almost two years ago (the Corn Exchange being closed to everything except quilting; the Coffee Shop's three large signs in its very small loo demanding payment; why there are six hairdressers but not one greasy spoon) I have come to the realisation that the town's arts community should never be underestimated.

Review by Ray Philpott