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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Agatha Crusty and the Village Hall Murders
Date : 12th November 2016
Venue : The Corn Exchange, Faringdon
Report by : Rob Bertwistle NODA Rep. District 12

Show Report

Thank you to Gary Field the Chairman of FDS for the very kind invitation to review the groups' latest production of the Derek Webb comedy drama *Agatha Crusty and the Village Hall Murders*. I received my customary warm welcome from Jo Webster and other members of the Front of House team and was treated to a very welcome pre-show Ploughman's Supper which was a very nice touch with which to welcome an audience.

I was also able to have a brief chat with director Helen Thrower who I have seen many times although mostly on the other side of the 'footlights'!

The Corn Exchange was a change of venue for FDS and worked well for the 'in the round' setting of the action. The audience were seated at tables placed around the central playing area and the cast soon adapted to moving and performing to all the audience. Helen's clever and thoughtful direction ensured that the action moved along at a pace and the audience had ever changing and interesting views of the characters. This funny play was embraced by the cast who really brought out the comedy. The characters were intentionally stereotypes of the Agatha Christie genre for which Mr. Webb has such a fondness and Miss Christie's novels must have been an inspirational starting point for him as the plot twists and murders pile up!

With a minimal set designed by Jo Webster the frequently occurring scene changes were effected quickly, efficiently and smoothly by the cast who dressed the set prior to each scene. The wide variety of props, co-ordinated by Ceri Baker were also used effectively.

The frequently changing scenes were interspersed with some cleverly chosen themes from famous fictional detective television dramas. I'm sure the audience had as much fun (and sometimes puzzlement) trying to recall and name the particular programmes, as I did.

The sound (Steve Greening) and the lighting plot (Ian Chandler, Gary Bates and Henry Marlow) all seemed to work fine.

Jeni Summerfield, Joan Lee and Lynda Bates who co-ordinated the wardrobe department did a very good job on the costumes and, being set in the present day, there were no particularly challenging costume requirements as far as I was aware.

Dave Headey's programme, though minimal, contained all the relevant plot, cast and crew details. Some well-chosen rehearsal shots were also included.

Carolyn Taylor was perfectly cast as the amateur sleuth Agatha Crusty (pronounced Croosty) and her excellent comic timing and cut glass accent were spot on. Carolyn used the stage well and her diction and projection were excellent. A first class performance.

Gary Field opened the proceedings in fine style as the archetypal cynical and grumpy caretaker. Gary's diction was clear and he used the playing area effectively. A well maintained air of the 'put upon' caretaker added to an excellent characterisation.

Joan Lee was very good as Agatha's sister-in-law Alice at whose invitation Agatha happens to be in the village on a short visit. Quite a difficult character to capture as she is very modest unpretentious lady who likes to do good deeds and runs the village knitting circle. I think Joan got her off to a 'T'. This was a lovely understated and gentle performance with good diction and stage presence.

Newcomer Jake Hobbs was very funny as the 'twins' Olivia and Oliver of the upper crust landed gentry brigade managing to bring two very different personalities to the stage with only the addition of a wig and hat. I'm sure he had great fun in this role. A well-judged performance.

Debbie Lock was just right as the officious Chair of the village hall committee - very smitten with the bachelor vicar. Her fluttering eye lashes and way over the top pursuit of his affections was very funny. A lovely comic performance.

Helen Harding gave an amusing performance as the incompetent and easily distracted Inspector Twigg. This part I suspect was probably written for a male actor to portray but Helen certainly pulled it off – reminding me of the many female detectives who abound on our TV screens but who are far less amusing! Helen had possibly the lion's share of the dialogue and gave a very convincing performance.

Maisie the conscientious but plain-speaking cleaning lady was played well by Jeni Summerfield. She used the stage well and always made an entrance - clattering her mop and bucket down unceremoniously. I liked the costume and wig which certainly rounded off the character. Well done!

I really liked Adrian Wells interpretation of Toby the local vicar - constantly avoiding (or at least trying to) the most definitely unwanted attentions of Eleanor. This was a good characterisation without becoming the 'stereotypical' village clergyman. He delivered his lines convincingly and interacted well with fellow cast members. A well-judged and amusing portrayal.

Verity Roberts played Isabella the landlady of the village local who had to act out her death scene in full view of the assembled cast which she did very convincingly. This was a very good performance and although this was not a huge part for the actress, Verity certainly made an impact during her time on stage. Well done!

Richard Lock made an amusing cameo appearance as the rather 'vacant' local bobby PC Locket and Ellie Hickmore got some pulses racing (notably the vicar's) as the 'life' model arriving for an art class. Well done!

This very entertaining and funny production kept the whole audience amused and guessing until the final moments. Well done to all concerned. It is sadly not possible to name everyone who contributed to the success of the performance but may I give my congratulations to *everyone* on a thoroughly enjoyable and fun evening's entertainment.

I look forward to seeing the FDS winter production.

With best wishes,

Rob

Rob Bertwistle

NODA Representative

District 12

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