

Review from Lance Bassett of ODN (*also Am Dram Man blog for Oxford Mail, where original of this review can be found*)

‘A FEAST FOR THE IMAGINATION’

By any standards it was a brave decision by Faringdon Dramatic Society to stage 'Cider with Rosie' featuring countless characters with ages ranging from starting school to 'fetch the doctor.'

The book written in 1959 by Laurie Lee was translated into a play by James Roose-Evans in 1963.

FDS's production ran between 9th-11th November in the local Junior School, but any similarity to the school play stopped there.

The performance was staged in the 'nearly round' with no set and of course any who knows the book will know there is no plot either. It is a series of vignettes of Lee's early life in the village of Slad in Gloucestershire during his early life just after the First World War.

Where to start? Director Debbie Lock used her space well transforming the area into an imaginary cottage, schoolroom, fairground, char-a-banc, the list is endless.

A narration accompanies the proceedings throughout, and FDS veteran Dave Headey provided this with some style. His diction and delivery was faultless and as for remembering that amount of dialogue, if I had a hat I would have not only taken it off but also thrown it across the room. We are talking about a two-hour production interspersed throughout with lengthy and witty monologues from memory-man Dave. An incredible and professional performance if ever I saw one, and I have been involved in Am Dram for over 45 years.

Sarah Varnom took on the part of Lee's mother and easily convinced us she was the slightly dotty but otherwise excellent single parent to Laurie and his siblings, his father having ran off years ago. If I'm being picky, it was a pity in the narrative we are told Laurie slept with his mother enveloped in her bare arms, but Sarah sported long sleeves. Also, as she boarded the virtual bus, she talked about her hat being askew, but wore no hat. Tiny niggles perhaps but nevertheless worth a comment. This is not to reproach a superb performance by Ms Varnom.

As for Laurie Lane playing the young Laurie Lee, what can I say? Nine years old and giving his all, in front of an audience of a hundred plus, with total confidence and clearly enjoying his role, a star is born methinks.

The myriad of young people who had parts in this production all deserve credit but there are too many to mention, but I can tell you there was not a dud amongst any of them. It was a treat to see youngsters performing so well and enthusiastically.

All the cast held their rural Gloucestershire accents well. There were times when the volume faded as playing in the round the actors periodically had their backs to you and their lines drifted away in the ether of the large school hall, but generally it wasn't a problem.

Leo Thrower, who again provided a convincing portrayal of the adolescent Lee, played Laurie as a teenager. The poignant scene drinking the cider with Rosie was particularly touching.

The lighting lot was exemplary. Nice touch as the lights rose slightly as each imaginary candle was lit. The lighting also brought to life the lightning storm, the changing of the seasons and the scene with the crone in the field of flowers.

The lighting crew excelled, in particular, in the scene where the day-tripping villagers ride the horses on the carousel, pure genius. Congratulations to Ian Chandler, Gary Bates and Steve Greening.

The only downside to this production for me was this. The play is set in the round as mentioned, however the second half featured much action and talk on the stage. With the way the seating was laid out this meant it was eyes right for the audience from where I was sitting, and due to the juxtaposition of the audience you couldn't see through them and could therefore only hear what was going on. This was besides getting a crick in the neck.

A small but valid point in otherwise an excellent, and judging by the audience reaction, successful production from this talented Group.