



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : The Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society Murder Mystery
Date : 9th November 2018
Venue : Faringdon Junior School
Report by : Rob Bertwistle Regional Rep. District 12

Show Report

Thanks for the very warm welcome to Faringdon Dramatic Society's latest production The Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society Murder Mystery – Murder at Checkmate Manor (which must be somewhere in the running for the longest play title on record and certainly the longest I have had to review!)

This play within a play about (as the title suggests) a Townswomen's Guild drama society putting on a murder mystery is the basis for many comedic disasters that inevitably befall an under-rehearsed and accident-prone cast who through lack of 'bodies' (forgive the pun) have to play multiple parts with all the associated costume and voice changes which are involved as well as cope with a decidedly wonky set and numerous props with a mind of their own! Of course, mayhem ensues and the resulting chaos is the very funny result.

There are also some (even more) decidedly odd moments in the narrative. A fashion show ('Gordon's appearance as futuristic TWG member in a tin foil creation was hilarious) and a random (and as far as I recall unexplained) slide-show collection of someone's holiday snaps while visiting the Isle of Man are two that spring to mind.

The five strong cast coped admirably with multi-role characters although the lone gentleman in the cast Martin Waymark escaped lightly as Gordon playing (in the play within a play) just the one role of Inspector O'Reilly. I liked Martin's characterisation of the hapless inspector but I felt in some instances some chances of comedy were missed. The miming of *I could be happy with you* from *The Boyfriend* was amusing but when Katie Dyet's character switched to the male part Martin did not switch to the female vocal line - a missed a comedic chance I felt.

Katie as Thelma was the next to escape relatively lightly having just two 'characters' to portray – and two very different ones - being at the opposite ends of the age spectrum with her young character Daphne Bishop bounding energetically around the stage with leotard and tennis racket and next portraying the wheel-chair bound Rose Bishop complete with a very unconvincing (all part of the gag I dare say) grey wig. Both characters were played very well.

Felicity was played with great relish by Sandra Keen who had great fun playing her three 'characters' Pawn the butler, Mrs. Castle in a very funny over-sized body suit and the gruff-voiced heavily moustachioed Colonel King.

Sarah Couzens as Audrey had fun with her quartet of 'characters'. From 'Lady' Doreen Bishop in twin set and pearls style to Joan Bishop complete with sou'wester.

Debbie Lock as Mrs. Reece was excellent with the portrayal of her five 'characters' all well delivered and with well-defined characteristics. I think my favourite was the over the top French maid Regine as well as a very convincing male portrayal, solicitor - Mr. Goodbody.

Director and Set Design:

The action - of which there was plenty - was deftly directed by Jo Webster who had her work cut out for her in the complex and fast-moving script. The pace never faltered, and the cast certainly gave it their all. Generally, the diction and projection were good, but I lost some dialogue in the very quiet 'asides' which really should have been louder to emphasise the comedy in 'forgotten' lines etc. The problem with this type of production is that it's never quite clear what is *meant* to go wrong and what might actually have gone wrong. Therefore, the cast can get away with quite a bit of unintentional ad-libbing. Some of the jokes did wear a bit thin I have to say – the false door was funny the first couple of times!

Jo also designed the set (constructed by Peter Webster, Alan Merrick and Jeff Barry) which served the company and action well. The collapsing flats and numerous other 'disasters' were very clever. I liked the inspector having to warm his hands on the upside-down fire (due to a fallen and replaced incorrectly flat). The many entrances and exits required of the cast must have been a logistical nightmare but everything seemed to work on the night. Other clever and obviously well-rehearsed (to make them look like mistakes!) examples of intentional errors were the collapsing table, the broken banister rail and the unattached bell pull to name but a few.

Stage management:

Derek Crowdson stage managed the mayhem with (seemingly!!) no hitches and the action and 'disasters' all worked well. Congratulations to you and your hard-working stage crew.

Sound:

The sound design by Gary Bates and an integral part of the comedy fitted the bill perfectly with all misplaced sounds and miscues working very well. The chiming of the clock going on splendidly forever being one memorable example.

Lighting:

Ian Chandler and Steve Greenings lighting effects (like the sound) were perfectly miscued and mistimed as lights went on when they shouldn't have and similarly off when they should have been on.

Make-up:

No make-up programme credit but this production did not call for highly specialised or character make-up and everyone looked in keeping with the style of the production and in the style of their character.

Props:

The endless props list was the sterling work of Jan and Derek Crowdson. This was a very 'busy' production for props which the cast all used effectively. It's a little hard to know if the technical props -

the collapsing table for example was the props department responsibility or part of the set. Whichever it was the props all 'seemingly' worked well (or badly).

Costumes:

The costumes co-ordinated by Joan Lee were all well matched to the different characters who appeared throughout the production. I liked the 'Colonels' costume which really made the character larger than life. The costume plot including some very quick changes must have been a nightmare and co-ordinating the different cast members and their costumes must have proved logistically challenging!

Programme:

Dave Heady's programme design contained all the familiar elements but an amusing centre piece contained an hilarious spoof 'programme' as presented by the Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society with some very funny errors, misspelt names and various votes of 'Thanks' to hapless members of the production team. Very amusing and nice comic touch!

Front of House:

It's always such a pleasure to visit FDS and this night was no exception. The Front of House team led by Helen Thrower were, as usual, generous with their hospitality making the visit to Faringdon on a particularly nasty and stormy November evening a pleasure.

This was certainly an unusual and entertaining evening's theatrical experience reminding all of us 'in the business' just how vital well-rehearsed and carefully produced shows must be before putting them before the 'paying public'!

Congratulations to everyone connected with this production which was obviously a great team effort and must have involved hours of rehearsals to achieve the desired effect as well as sterling 'behind the scenes' involvement.

I wish Faringdon Dramatic Society great success with their next production.

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