



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society (FDS)
Production : Our Country's Good
Date : 7th November 2019
Venue : Faringdon Junior School
Report by : Rob Bertwistle

Show Report

Thanks for the kind invitation from Chairman Gary Field to attend the latest production from Faringdon Dramatic Society the thought-provoking modern classic *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. The company provided an enjoyable evening's entertainment telling the story of the difficulties facing both the convicts and the officers in the first Australian penal colony established in 1789. The play is a powerful piece of drama depicting the attempts of The Governor to bring a degree of civilisation to the colony through the vehicle of a play to be performed by some of the convicts under the direction of one of his junior officers.

This was very much an ensemble piece with most of the cast doubling as two characters with just a token change of costume indicating the character.

Directed by the talented and inventive Carolyn Taylor with assistance from Carole Tappenden the cast brought their various diverse characters very much to life. The pace was good and cues were largely picked up quickly. The performance being in the round meant that often characters were facing away from certain members of the audience but projection and the clarity of dialogue was good. Also the scenes far from being static flowed well so as to keep the actors 'on the move' and thus engage with the audience effectively. I was impressed with the characterisations with many moments of pathos, comedy and great story telling.

Richard Lock gave a confident and absorbing performance as Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark tasked with the job of turning hardened and embittered convicts into actors. He brought a certain warmth to the character and made Clark a believable and sympathetic character. Richard spoke clearly with good diction and projection.

Dave Headey gave his diverse dual roles as John Wisenhammer and Captain Jemmy Campbell equal depth of character. John the convict was fairly well read, (having read the dictionary up to the letter L!) reserved and resigned to his fate - whilst Campbell the Officer was callous, boorish and seemingly constantly drunk. I liked the two interpretations of these very different characters. Again clear diction was very much in evidence.

Alan Taylor was well cast as the kindly and forward thinking Governor Arthur Phillip. He remained calm and level headed in the face of criticism and was inspirational in his views about the rehabilitation

of criminals. Alan really brought out these qualities in the character with clear diction and good projection.

I liked Dominic Bullock's powerful interpretation of the jealous and deeply troubled Midshipman Harry Brewer. This was a strong characterisation with the perfect capturing of this character's torment. A memorable performance indeed!

Jeff Barry was excellent as the antagonistic and bigoted Major Robbie Ross. He made his disdain and distaste for the convicts very plain. A strong characterisation with good stage presence matched by good diction and projection.

Gary Field had two very different characters to play in his dual roles. He contrasted the nervous and guilt-ridden convict turned hangman Ketch Freeman with the upright and principled officer Captain David Collins who eventually discovers he has a heart. Gary handled these two characters very well with some well-contrasted acting complimented by good diction. I particularly liked the measuring of Liz as 'Ketch' prepares her for hanging. Well done!

Martin Wymark gave his two very different characters strong interpretations. Convicted but smooth-talking pickpocket Robert Sideway was well characterised and contrasted nicely with his other role as Captain Watkin Tench who did not believe that criminals could be reformed. Martin displayed good stage presence and clear diction.

Mary Brenham the convict who is more educated than her fellow prisoners because she can read was played thoughtfully by Jayne Hoyland. This performance had some lovely moments of humour and pathos and Jayne used the playing area to good effect. I liked her scenes with Wishammer and the relationship with Ralph was well played. A nicely judged performance.

Sandra Keen was excellent in her dual personas. Briefly as the terse Lieutenant Will Dawes but principally as the troubled convict Liz Morden. Sandra endowed the character with strength yet vulnerability and gave a moving performance, whilst showing a stubborn and fiery side to the character. Good diction and stage presence made for a well-rounded performance.

I very much liked Debbie Lock as the crass and loud-mouthed Dabby Bryant with some wonderful moments of pique and sulkiness interwoven with some very good comedic moments. Her other stage persona was the unlikeable but convincingly played Second Lieutenant William Faddy. Debbie gave a very believable performance and used the playing area to good effect.

Helen Thrower was excellent as the gruff and forthright Lieutenant George Johnston but really excelled in her portrayal of the troubled convict Duckling Smith. Helen played the character with a wide range of emotions from sulky stubbornness to the very moving scene played on realising her lover is dead. This was a great performance with good stage presence and clear diction.

Joan Lee portrayed her two very different characters extremely well. The rude and uncouth Meg Long was very good but I really liked her interpretation of the pious and moralistic Reverend Johnson. These characterisations were both excellent. Joan used the playing area well and her diction was clear with good projection.

Sarah Varnom's recorded Aboriginal voice interjections sounded suitably ethereal and mysterious and were accompanied effectively by the equally mysterious sounding music tracks.

Sound in the capable hands of Gary Bates worked well with no noticeable hitches except a brief interlude where some strange crackles could be heard intermittently. I liked the atmospheric musical interludes and the echoing Aboriginal voice. Some good wildlife effects added to the atmosphere of the 'outdoor' scenes.

Similarly, the lighting effects by Ian Chandler and Steve Greening created some atmospheric moments with some clever use of colour and gobos notably in the jail and the water effects.

The make-up looked very good for this production with all the characters looking good in their various roles. As there were many dual roles to play the make-up always reflected the character very well.

Jo Webster's set design served the company well. Played in 'the round' the minimalistic set gave audience members different perspectives as the actors moved around the playing area. I liked the various pieces of set dressing including crates, trunks and general seafaring paraphernalia. The two side masking legs at the stage end looked quite effective but needed extending inwards slightly as from my seat I could see cast members moving up and down some off stage steps awaiting their entry which was quite distracting - do check sight lines from all seats if possible. The cast moved the various items required for the ensuing scenes with minimum fuss and ensured the action flowed seamlessly. I very much liked the clever construction of the rowing boat - it was most effective. Stage manager Alan Merrick ensured the production proceeded with no noticeable hitches.

The props team, Alison Morris, Jan Crowdson and Derek Crowdson had assembled some authentic looking props including rifles, lanterns and a telescope all of which looked very good and which the cast used effectively.

Joan Lee and Jeni Summerfield had similarly ensured the cast were costumed in era and setting appropriate costumes which looked very good. Just make sure you check each other before going on stage. One gentleman's jacket buttons were not quite right on his first appearance on stage. However, the costumes looked fine and the convicts looked suitably grubby and dishevelled!

The programme by Dave Headey followed the usual FDS format and had some interesting snippets about the play, the history behind the story and usual cast biographies.

Thank you for the usual warm welcome from the Front of House Team co-ordinated by Sarah Varnom.

This was a most interesting and entertaining evening of drama from this dedicated and resourceful company who had gone a little out of their comfort zone to produce a compelling and polished piece of theatre. Congratulations to all involved. I look forward to your next production with anticipation.

Best wishes,

Rob

Rob Bertwistle
Regional Representative
District 12
NODA London
Tel: 07731 642 907 Email: rob.bertwistle@noda.org.uk

Facebook: @NODAREgCounLondon

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