



Society :Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production :Reflections 1914-18
Date :November 8th 2014
Venue :Faringdon Junior School, Faringdon, Oxon.
Report by :Rob Bertwistle

Report

I was very pleased to accept the kind offer from Faringdon Dramatic Society to review their latest production – Reflections 1914-18.

This production, being staged to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of World War One, was written and compiled by Carolyn Taylor - though this was also, clearly, a Company collaboration of writings, poems and music from that infamous conflict in our history often referred to as ‘The Great War’.

The opening was very effective with the Company in various ‘freezes’ accompanied by monologues outlining the build up to the outbreak of war. This was also illustrated by large pictorial images projected on a screen up stage of the playing area - reinforcing the words being spoken.

The staging was ‘in the round’ which gave an immediate and edgy feeling to the performance – involving the audience in a much more intimate way with, for example, eye contact and an unusually close proximity to the action. Consequently, all the dialogue was very clear even when the actors were addressing the ‘far’ section of the audience. The actors also moved smoothly and frequently between the audience sections so both sections of the audience felt included.

The action was led by three Narrators - Joan Lee, Carolyn Taylor and Jenni Summerfield - who set the scenes, introduced the characters and provided a link and sometimes a brief précis of the scene to follow. All your diction was clear and delivered in a measured, though not pedantic, style which gave the audience time to digest every word.

The segments of the performance were denoted by a year – 1914 to 1918 and this enabled a smooth sequential flow to the narrative. There were some beautifully executed scenes. I liked the recruiting scene and Sean Hodgson’s gruff recruiting officer was well portrayed. He looked the part and sounded very much in character. The youngest member (I presume) of the company was Leo Thrower very believable as the newspaper boy.

Mr. McGregor (Peter Webster) and Mr. Guinness (Alan Taylor) were the two suitably grumpy social commentators. Reading their newspapers in the Tea Room and commenting on unfolding events. I liked your interpretation, gentlemen. Other ‘customers’ in the tea room were Emma (Sandra Keen), Janet (Debbie Lock) and Madge (Helen Thrower). Your scenes were played with humour and pathos in equal measure with some lovely comic timing. Good, clear diction was also evident. Carole Tappenden was a delight as the long suffering, and slightly impatient, waitress.

Adrian Wells interpretation of the poet Wilfred Owen was well observed as he wrote letters home to his mother Susan (Jo Webster) from ‘the Front’. I liked your reactions, Jo, to the words you were ‘reading’ and the dialogue ‘shift’ between you both, was very well done. I did think the distance (on stage that is) between you both was too great. The same applied to the other letter exchanging scenes. Closer, (maybe back to back?) and lit with a strong pool of light when speaking would have had a much more dramatic effect. However, that is more of a directorial consideration.

Andy Pritchard was convincing as the poet Siegfried Sassoon while Seb Allum and Ellie Hickman as the young lovers Cecil Slack and Dora Willatt complimented each other perfectly – again sharing correspondence between the front-line and home. We were treated to very touching performances from both actors.

The soldiers, Gary Bates, Gary Field and Matthew Warner all played their parts very believably and looked good in their uniforms.

Here, special mention must be given to Debra Warner in her role as Musical Director and pianist for the evening. The Company were well drilled in their delivery of the songs and all seemed word perfect. There were some touching solo pieces and the audience participation numbers gave a sense of involvement. The music from the period, played on the piano to cover and link scene changes, was very effective indeed. 'Live' music is always so much more exciting and I loved the guitar/recorder accompaniment to one of the songs. It would have been nice to see the two gentlemen credited in the programme. However, a couple of unaccompanied 'comic' songs performed by the soldiers in the trenches were rather over- long and did not really add to the 'whole'.

One segment of the evening took the form of a play within a play – 'Lions and Donkeys' by Steve Harper – a short one act play, set in the trenches. It was a curious mix of comedy and pathos dealing with the way the Generals etc. (the Donkeys) led and managed the brave rank and file soldiers (the Lions) during the conflict. It has to be said it did not show the so-called 'leaders' - those in command in a terribly good light!

The four male characters interacted well but could the action have possibly been moved further down-stage to carry on the 'in the round' concept? Again, the lighting could have been used to create more atmosphere, with maybe more use of blues to give a feeling of a chill and bleak evening in the trenches and a lower level of illumination in general might have added to the effect. Sound effects of distant gun battles would have added an extra layer of theatrical magic.

Jeff Barry made Sgt. Tommy Atkins a larger than life character. Jeff gave the character some lovely pathos and humour. Clear diction too, so important!

Seb Allum was suitably bolshie as Cpl. Dave Rawlings – again very clear diction and a good interpretation of a lower ranking soldier defying an Officer.

I thought Richard Lock was convincing as the mysterious German Officer, Willie Schmidt, who strikes up an unlikely friendship with Atkins and Rawlings. A very well- maintained accent through-out.

Austen Roberts as Lt. Hargreaves had, perhaps, the toughest character to portray of the four. He was the young, naïve officer who discovers this new unlikely alliance and is determined to end it by almost any means available to him. Austen gave just the right degree of panic/shock reaction to the situation. A well observed characterisation indeed.

The play itself, (whilst not wishing to detract from the performances) for me, did not sit comfortably with the rest of the evening's offerings. Would the evening have been any less powerful without its inclusion I wonder?

The overall staging of the evening's entertainment was largely very good. Just a word about feet or rather the noise made by them in particular! After leaving the playing area performers must walk quietly! At one point quite a large group of the company exited to the rear of the playing area and could clearly be heard leaving the auditorium, 'back stage'. Discipline off, as well as on, the stage is so important and a scene can be ruined by unnecessary noise from 'off-stage'. To carry the point a little further – could the whole of the playing area have been covered in some way? Not knowing your budgetary limitations it's not for me to say what would have worked, but, for example, could some

artificial grass or brown carpeting have been laid to serve two purposes – to deaden the sound of noisy footwear and to hide the highly polished floor - covered in game markings which can often be found in a school hall? Perhaps I'm being 'picky' but I think theatre is about creating a little magic and the more we can add the better!

The Directors, (Reflections - Carolyn Taylor and Lions and Donkeys - Peter Webster and Gary Field) had obviously worked hard in moving their cast(s) around the stage - and in character development. Entrances and exits were smooth and well executed as were the scene changes, largely carried out by cast members.

Lighting Design by Ian Chandler was adequate but could have been used to more dramatic effect as outlined earlier.

Sound and screen design by Gary Bates was good and was ably operated by Paul Mountford-Lister. Costumes by Jenni Summerfield, Joan Lee and Lynda Bates looked mostly in keeping with the period though some (as the programme points out) were not strictly authentic. However, I thought the ladies costumes looked particularly 'in keeping' with the period.

No mention is made in the programme of anyone having responsibility for make-up. Did you apply your own? Maybe you thought as you were so close to the audience it didn't matter. I must say I didn't notice any make-up which appeared to be out of place but it would have been nice to see the men at 'the front' looking a bit dirtier!

Props by Ceri Baker all look very good and in period and were used well by the cast members.

The set, designed by Peter Webster (you have been very busy in this production!!) was simple but effective. The cast moved, placed and removed 'set' items smoothly and with minimum fuss.

The Programme by Dave Headey was clear and simple with a striking and relevant front cover which was echoed in the projected display at the beginning and ending of the performance.

It was a pleasure to meet and have a brief chat with your producer and Chairperson Katie Dyet before the proceedings began. She was obviously very proud of you all and quite rightly!

Finally, I must mention the scrumptious fish and chip supper which was laid on before the performance. My compliments to the chef (chip shop!).

I had a first class evening and may I thank and congratulate all those involved – back stage, on stage and of course, Front of House, for a pleasant and thought provoking evening.

May I wish you every success with your next production 'The Snow Queen – A Winters Tale' early next year.

Rob Bertwistle

Regional Rep.

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