



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Act Naturally
Date : 10th November 2023
Venue : The Elms Primary School, Faringdon

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Act Naturally". Gary himself was there to help front-of-house and to run the raffle, and Director Lu Waywell was kind enough to spare me a few minutes to chat during the interval.

Lu told me that she pitched the show to the Society after reading a lot of scripts online, and that the humour of the piece had appealed to her. I can understand that, as the piece was consistently amusing, and occasionally laugh-out-loud funny. But the play also presents some dramatic challenges: like Hislop and Newman's "A Bunch of Amateurs", it requires the actors on stage to portray a group of folk who are themselves putting on a play, with the different levels of characterisation that this implies. The title of the play, "Act Naturally", brings its own imperative. Could the company do it?

Well, yes and no, but this really isn't a criticism of the company. For reasons that become apparent in the Second Act, the various characters that we meet at a committee meeting of the Fannington Historical Sites Preservation Society are drawn rather larger than life, and the necessary emphasis on certain behavioural traits and opinions tends to make these personalities a bit two-dimensional. Despite this, a lot of the business of the meeting was well observed; I have certainly attended plenty of committee meetings that proceeded in similar ways!

The first to arrive was Judith, played by Jayne Hoyland. Judith isn't the sharpest tool in the box but has nevertheless been entrusted with taking the minutes of the meeting; the way in which she maintained a single-minded focus on this task, seemingly oblivious to what was being said and done around her, was nicely portrayed. Jayne also brought a certain serenity to the role, as if her processing speed wasn't quite up to working out what was going on. She was at least aware that the hall was to host a committee meeting rather than an open meeting, unlike Lionel (played by Richard Lock). Richard is rather good at playing self-important community leaders, and as quickly as Judith could put out the chairs for the committee, so Lionel had them re-arranged in rows. Richard has a clear tone and knows exactly how to inflect his lines to illuminate their meaning while often also giving an insight into his character.

Next to arrive for the meeting was Mildred, played by Joan Lee. Unafraid to speak her mind, Mildred has some of the best lines, many of which Joan delivered with relish; I did feel that she might have been even more caustic at times. Some of her thoughtless remarks, such as when she said that she had forgotten to wash her hands on greeting the chairman after emerging from the ladies' loo, were well timed. Joan has a slight tendency towards frequent small gestures which didn't look entirely natural, and this tendency must have been contagious as I subsequently thought some other members of the company also gesticulated a bit too much. Dave Headey as Rupert, however, generally utilised gestures more sparingly while capturing the essence of the

reluctant and mildly exasperated chairman, and he made good use of facial expression to project his frustrations and impatience.

Debbie Lock as Bea brought her character's rebellious nature to the fore, skilfully blending a lack of tolerance for the ridiculous with an understanding for those, like Judith, who are simply doing their best. She was particularly good at reacting to what was going on around her, deflecting the audience's attention back to where it should be and projecting her opinion through understated expressions and gestures. Sarah Couzens, as Megan, completed the gathering at the meeting; Sarah has excellent vocal variation and is able to capture the natural rhythm of a phrase, even if she too was prone to underlining everything with a gesture. The meeting was interrupted by the local policeman, Ted (played by Byron Pound) – a tricky role, this, as there are so many stereotypes to avoid. Byron's portrayal tended towards the inexperienced and ineffectual policeman epitomised by Constable Goody in "The Thin Blue Line", but Byron succeeded in keeping his character just about plausible.

Once the committee members settled down for their meeting, the quality of the observational comedy improved, with many of the features of such meetings mercilessly lampooned. "For the record", "through the chair" – it was all here. There were perhaps a few moments when the tone of the writing, with its increasing level of frustration, was slightly at variance with the actors' delivery: an example, perhaps, of the difference between knowing your lines and owning your lines. Hitting cues early, even occasionally talking over others, and modulating phrases would all have helped to make some sections of dialogue a little less starchy and a lot more persuasive. Judith was helped by having the duty of taking minutes, so she always had something else to do (and a pen to fiddle with) – could other characters have been given files, papers, packets of sweets, cups of tea ...?

Somehow the committee decides that it is going to put on a play to raise funds, and the Second Act shares the fruits of their labours, which is very much in the tradition of "The Play That Goes Wrong". From the moment Rupert walks out to introduce the play to the audience, and his microphone fails to function before we are all overwhelmed by horrendous feedback, just about everything that can go wrong does go wrong. Now we understand why the various characters we met in the first act were just a little bit two-dimensional, as their defining traits feed into their onstage personae.

It really was the most glorious send up of all that defines drama performances a little below grass roots level. I particularly enjoyed Rupert's total separation of gesture and spoken word, and his woodenness crossing the stage; Mildred's mannered delivery of her lines, and mispronunciations; and Megan correcting Bea's tendency to gesture with her downstage arm in mid-scene. Ted introduced some excellent physical comedy in his high octane performance as a "Swat" team policeman, while all the murder victims found some way of reducing the jeopardy by reacting to a gunshot long after we hear it, walking across the stage to collapse, or by carrying their own stretcher offstage. Lionel and Megan, supposedly the author and director of this murder mystery, can't help but interfere out of character, while Judith, totally confused, just serenely carried on.

The entire cast did an excellent job of delivering their lines badly, often failing to synchronise lines and actions, and the moment when a conversational loop is established, accompanied by rabbit-in-the-headlights expressions, was perhaps the comedic highlight of the evening. It wasn't always easy to determine whether or

not a prompt was required or scripted, but the tendency for some actors to paraphrase their lines, or to misguidedly try to help another player towards a forgotten line, were grimly familiar. All those frequent small gestures seen in Act One gave way to supersized sweeps of the arm, while any rhythm in the dialogue was lost in mechanical recitation. The cast was also very adept at dropping in and out of character, so that when Megan, playing Detective Inspector Drummond, frames her thinking by stating “motivation, means, opportunity”, Bea (or was it Judith?) immediately questions this as a definition.

Even the technical crew, probably reeling from Lionel’s earlier remarks about those who work behind the scenes, contributed to the Second Act atmosphere by mistiming their cues, with the tabs coming in and out and sound cues playing when not wanted. In reality, of course, the production team did an excellent job with limited resources. The functional box set exactly looked the part, with its practical doors off to the hall’s loos and kitchen, its noticeboard suitably dressed, and the little details such as the cycling helmets hung up on the wall hooks – not to mention the practical clock telling the right time! The office setting’s understated transformation into a park, with a few bits of greenery here and there, matched the ambition of the fictional play-within-a-play. Properties (Heather Kent and Julie Kent), and costumes (Helen Tate and Lu Waywell) were all entirely in keeping with the premise of the production, with the characters in the murder mystery sporting low-budget approximations to the costumes they required. The lighting (Ian Chandler and Steve Greening) and sound (Gary Bates) ensured that every action and word was clear, and I particularly liked the hand dryer effects from the Council Office toilets.

The murder mystery in the second act came with its own programme, a masterpiece in its own right. The layout, use of clip art, over-capitalisation and wonderfully parochial programme note were all completely characteristic of a rank amateur production. I did appreciate the “Rejected by NODA” logo! There was also fun to be had finding all the misspelled words, including “Acknowledgements”; I think it was probably an oversight that this word was similarly misspelled in the actual programme ...

Gary told me that the production very nearly didn’t go ahead after a heating system breakdown at the venue. Well, I am sure that everyone at Friday evening’s performance was very glad that it did. This staging of Fannington Historical Sites Preservation Society’s finest work was an advertisement for local community theatre at its best. Act naturally? Possibly not. But act appropriately, engagingly and entertainingly? Resoundingly yes.

Andrew Walter
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11th November 2023