



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Be My Baby
Date : 20th May 2023
Venue : Buscot Park Theatre

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Be My Baby" in the beautiful surroundings of Buscot Park Theatre. Gary himself was on hand to greet me, and Director Debbie Lock was amongst those who found time for a brief chat about the play.

You don't so much stage a play in the Buscot Park Theatre as put it under a microscope. It's such an intimate space, seating about 50, that the audience can practically reach out and touch the stage. Everything has to be small, and that includes the performances; as an actor you don't need to project your character so much as allow the audience to look into your eyes. "Be My Baby" was a brilliant choice of play for this venue: set in a mother and baby home in the North of England in 1964, it casts a light on a hidden world where unmarried women were sent to have their babies and give them up for adoption. It is also a minute examination of the bond between a mother and her child, and the emotional impact of that bond being broken.

It's a difficult and emotive subject, but Debbie and her talented cast of six actors treated it with sensitivity and skill. They used the space wonderfully well, and the understated performances made the anguish and trauma these women went through so much more real and affecting.

The play centres on the experience of Mary Adams, played by 15-year-old Willow Tate. Mary is expecting a child in the next couple of months and has been brought to the home by her mother so that the birth and subsequent adoption can be hidden from society in general and from Mary's father in particular. It's an understatement to say that Mary has quite a lot to deal with. There's her relationship with the baby's father. There's living away from home and adjusting to life in an institution. There's the birth itself. And there's the separation from her child, adopted by a couple that Mary can't meet or even know anything about. I hope this doesn't sound condescending – I certainly don't mean it to – but it was remarkable how such a young actor was able to portray these life-defining events with such power and poignancy. Willow was confident enough to let others drive the narrative as Mary has little agency in what happens to her, and she was aided by some excellent character-defining properties: the white gloves, her teddy bear, the modest collection of records representing a new era of social change.

Willow was able to portray Mary's vulnerability as she tries to adapt to her new life and make new friends, while also bringing out her character's naivety - like most of the girls in the home, she knows very little about childbirth. But Mary also has this quiet determination that she is going to remain in control of her own destiny, and Willow's real skill was in balancing Mary's anxieties with her innocence and optimism to give a well-rounded performance which was natural and totally believable; her depiction of Mary's hopes and fears when she realises that the baby is on its way was quite extraordinarily persuasive.

Willow's mother, Mrs Adams, was played by Willow's actual mother, Helen Tate, which must have been an interesting and emotional experience for them both. Mary's unexpected pregnancy clearly wasn't part of Mrs Adams' plans for her daughter, but she is set on the course of action that she honestly believes is in Mary's best long-term interests, no matter what her daughter might think. With her clipped Northern accent, single-mindedness of purpose and respectable twinset with matching hat, Mrs Adams sets about dealing with this most unfortunate situation with the least possible fuss. Any questions addressed to Mary are answered on her behalf. Helen might have made Mrs Adams' non-negotiable and business-like approach to Mary's pregnancy more potent by hitting her cues even harder, to emphasise the fact that she is not prepared to listen to others' point of view, but this was nevertheless a powerful depiction of a loving mother who wants to protect her daughter but needs to do it her way.

The mother and baby home is run by a matron, played by Carolyn Taylor. The matron is kindly and benevolent, steadfast in her beliefs and habits. Carolyn portrayed her as a fixed point in a changing world, firm in her view that the old traditional ways are the best and doing her utmost to prevent the young mothers from forming any sort of bond with their soon-to-be-adopted babies. Tremendous stage presence helped Carolyn to exude an air of calm authority and emotional detachment, and she demonstrated how powerful a little extra emphasis, or a meaningful clearing of the throat can be. Only at the very end, when Mary and Mrs Adams are feeling the full impact of what they have been through, and Matron is remembering what happened to her when she was much younger, did Carolyn allow the mask to slip and through expression alone was able to transmit the deep pain that her character still felt from events many years before.

Dolores and Norma, young mothers-to-be and Mary's new friends at the home, were played by Jade Atkinson and Heather Kent respectively. Both Jade and Heather are relatively inexperienced actors, and both delivered performances that belied this fact. Doll is the more idealistic and outgoing, but her lack of education extends beyond her ignorance of the mechanics of reproduction to her needing help with letters to her baby's father. Jade skilfully balanced these aspects of Doll's character, even if the gestures that accompanied some of her lines came over as a tiny bit rehearsed rather than totally spontaneous. Jade also dealt maturely with the revelation that Doll had essentially been raped – there certainly hadn't been much consent involved – in a dark reminder that too many women are still dealing with similar situations today.

Norma's character is probably the last to be established, but Heather's skill in blending her character into the ensemble only made her traumatic experience when giving birth all the more shocking. Heather had a tendency to change the pace and tenor of her lines quite suddenly when recalling what had happened to her, alternating rapidly between relative calm and anguished outburst. I found myself wondering whether the phrases needed to be shaped more carefully, or whether the jagged, broken delivery served to highlight how damaging and upsetting her experience of childbirth had been, and how her mental health had been adversely affected. Norma's disintegration is painful to watch, and Heather's slightly haunted, unstable characterisation will, I suspect, live long in the memory of many in the audience.

The oldest and most experienced of the girls in the home is Queenie, played by Lu Waywell. Queenie is a sort of prefect, trusted by Matron and a big sister to the younger residents. It isn't a total surprise when we discover that Queenie has had a baby before. Lu was able to bring out Queenie's more worldly character, encouraging and comforting in equal measure, her kindness and optimism powered by empathy and a winning

smile. Her dialogue always sounded completely natural and was delivered with a consistent accent; Lu also demonstrated her ability to inspire reflection in the audience through simple, understated gestures and expressions. The scene in which Lu led the girls in a raucous depiction of a baby's nappy being changed was especially joyful. All the girls had evidently worked on their posture, supporting their babies when pregnant in a very realistic manner.

This is a serious and thought-provoking piece, but it is leavened with humour and particularly by the inclusion of several well-chosen songs of the period. These were tunefully sung along to, with the sort of backing group choreography that girls might very well have come up with in their bedrooms. The costumes, particularly Mary and Mrs Adams' day clothes, were authentically representative of the period, and indeed the production was packed with persuasive period detailing – the luggage, the hairstyles, the record player. The set, principally combining elements of matron's office and Mary's dormitory, made effective use of the limited space. The passage of time was indicated by turning over the pages of a desk calendar, and even here the detailing was impressive as the days and dates matched up correctly for 1964. The dialogue includes some memory-jolting references to twin tubs and the like, with a vintage phone and a copy of "Jackie" magazine with Elvis on the cover just adding to the nostalgia. Lighting (by Craig Atkinson) and sound (by Gary Bates) were well done, and I liked the way in which the music which was part of the action was sometimes developed into cover for a scene change.

Ultimately this play is about the performances, and the whole cast should be immensely proud of how they brought to life this sad episode in our recent past. Director Debbie Lock clearly understands what works in a small space, how in many ways this is more akin to acting on film than onstage, and she drew powerful and affecting performances from her cast. I don't think anybody could have left Buscot Park Theatre unimpressed by the production or unmoved by the experience.

Andrew Walter
NODA Regional Representative, London District 12

22nd May 2023