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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Confusions
Date : 20th May 2022
Venue : Buscot Park Theatre

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of Alan Ayckbourn's "Confusions" at the beautiful Buscot Park Theatre. Constructed in 1936 and seating just 62 people, the theatre is set in the East Pavilion; in the interval I was able to admire the courtyard swimming pool with its echoes of Cliveden, study the frescoes on the walls of the Pavilion's archway, and read the programme while taking in the extensive views across the grounds. It's a wonderful setting for a summer evening's entertainment.

And the entertainment lived up to its setting. Such a compact space demands an intimate play, and "Confusions" is in fact a series of four short plays based on the themes of loneliness and relationships. Directors Debbie Lock and Carolyn Taylor opted to set the first two plays in Part 1 in 1982, and the two plays in Part 2 in 2022.

Part 1 opened with "Mother Figure". We discover Lucy, played by Verity Roberts, in her superficially untidy home attempting to get her young children to go to bed. Her next-door neighbour, Rosemary (played by Sarah Couzens), steps into this chaotic scene; it's clear that these two characters don't know each other well. Rosemary has received a phone call, but things don't develop in the way that she – or the audience – might have expected.

Verity was very convincing as Lucy, a young mother and primary school teacher struggling to cope, wrapped up against the world in her pyjamas and dressing gown but retaining a slightly mysterious aura that allowed the unexpected events that followed to seem plausible. There were echoes of Joyce Grenfell in the way Verity addressed her visitors. Sarah was all nervous energy as Rosemary, primly treading that fine line between curiosity and not wanting to appear nosy; her transition from middle-aged to more childlike behaviours was managed so gradually and skilfully that it took a moment to realise what was going on. Such a compact space demands small performances, and Sarah has mastery of the little movements, gestures and details that bring such performances to life. Even her tone of voice changed as she acted ever younger.

Dominic Bullock as Terry, Rosemary's husband, was drawn into this extraordinary world and his essential character, together with his relationship with Rosemary, was exposed as he too regressed towards infancy. Dominic was less subtle, but then so is his character. "Mother Figure" is a curious vignette which could easily be reduced through overacting to a farce, but here it was kept sufficiently delicate to persuade you (or me, at least) that it had something interesting and important to say.

Part 1 closed with "Between Mouthfuls", a study of two separate couples dining in a restaurant. Not just any two couples though; Ayckbourn cleverly reveals the important details as we are drawn into the piece. Donald Pearce, played by Gary Field, is the first to arrive; he's a successful businessman, and Gary successfully portrayed a man at ease in this environment – articulate, authoritative and with good interpersonal skills.

Unfortunately, these latter skills don't quite extend as far as his domineering wife, played with a sort of aggressive hysteria by Sarah Varnom. Just why did it take Donald three weeks to agree that contract in Rome? The tension and anger rise at their table, but Gary and Sarah ensure that an explosion is averted.

Meanwhile at the second table, successful salesman Martin Chalmers (played by Mike Fraser) is celebrating the return of his wife Polly (played by Jayne Isham) from a Mediterranean holiday. She's been away for three weeks. On her own. In Rome. By now the audience has pretty much pieced the puzzle together, but the characters on stage carry on regardless. Mike's portrayal of Martin was very believable - a man wedded to his job, talking at his wife but not listening to her. His patronising and misogynistic attitude is summed up when he replies to one of his wife's questions by saying that she wouldn't understand if he told her. Jayne portrayed Polly as a woman more or less driven to confess all just to get her husband's attention for a moment. And when the truth finally emerges, the norms of office life win out over the destructive damage of an affair.

"Between mouthfuls" was cleverly staged as the two couples remained in character throughout but dropped the volume of their conversations as our attention was drawn to the other table, while maintaining the intensity of their gestures and mannerisms. Alison Morris as the waiter took us from one table to the other, defusing tensions through the etiquette of her trade in the manner of someone charged with keeping all the plates spinning. The characterisation of all five actors was spot on throughout, even if the whole business of eating out resulted in a few pauses in the conversations. The prop food looked good enough to eat. It was prop food, wasn't it?

The audience was asked to clear the auditorium in the interval to allow the props to be moved; if you wanted a reminder about just what a small performance space this is, then here it was. We had already seen how the props for the first short play had been cleverly repurposed to provide the restaurant setting of the second. We returned to the auditorium to find three benches on stage, each soon occupied by one of the actors in "A Talk in the Park". This meant that the fourth character, Arthur (played by Dave Headey) has to ask if he can share Cheryl's bench (a second outing for Verity Roberts). Arthur doesn't know the form and delivers a monologue to Cheryl, who does her best to ignore him. Verity's well-observed routine incorporated unwelcoming body language, much looking at her mobile phone, and the sort of half smile that is designed to close down conversations – it was all here.

When Arthur starts to talk about his relationships with women it all proves too much, and Cheryl asks if she can sit next to Charles (a returning Gary Field). But Cheryl proves to be just as irritating to Charles as Arthur was to her. So, Charles sits with Doreen (played by Joan Lee), who in due course asks to sit with Arthur ... All four actors were especially good at playing the unwilling listener, with excellent body language. Each had also mastered their monologue and by extension inhabited their character – I particularly liked Joan's mask and headphone-wearing dog walker, an alarming combination of several people I regularly bump into in my own village. The quality of observation is in the writing, but it was the quality of the acting that brought it to life and highlighted the connection to the previous piece: that we all like to talk about ourselves, but we aren't always prepared to listen.

The final short play was "Gosforth's Fete". Gordon Gosforth – a sort of amalgam of Basil Fawlty and Martin Bryce from "Ever Decreasing Circles" – is the driving force behind the village fete, and if the village in question isn't Dibley then it might as well be. Richard Lock captured the essence of this self-important pillar of the community, doing all the jobs that nobody else can be trusted to do, which it turns out includes sleeping with

one of the girls in the village (Millie, played by Lucy Waywell). This comes as news to her fiancé Stuart Stokes, the scout leader played by Jacob Bayliss, who finds out because Gordon succeeds in fixing the PA just as Millie is telling him that she's pregnant. Add a vicar and a councillor to the mix and you have a classic farce which was played out with just the right amount of self-awareness by the company.

Richard brought a lot of energy to his portrayal of Gordon, a character lacking in emotional intelligence who presses on regardless as everything goes wrong around him. He's right not to trust Millie, who doesn't just lack emotional intelligence, but any intelligence at all; Lucy brought a touch of a west country accent and a certain blind loyalty to her interpretation of the character. Jacob Bayliss played the wronged Stuart Stokes who seeks solace in alcohol, and Jacob demonstrated an excellent capacity for acting drunk as he downed a whole bottle of wine (or was it sherry?) in no time at all. Debbie Lock played Councillor Mrs Pearson as if there was an unpleasant smell right under her nose, delivering her prepared speech to open the fete without any reference to the mayhem around her, while Joan Lee portrayed the slightly deaf Rev Joan Braithwaite with the optimistic bonhomie of a member of the clergy called upon to support a village event.

A great strength of the evening was that I really believed in all of the characters – whether they were regressing to childhood, ignoring their spouses' affairs, or mired in a fete worse than death. The actors all knew and timed their lines so well that you forgot that's what you were hearing, and the characterisations were so good because of the attention to detail. The gestures, the mannerisms, the reactions – all were understated and subtle enough to work in such an intimate space. Directors Debbie Lock and Carolyn Taylor clearly understand how the venue makes demands on the performance – and in such a small space a raised eyebrow says much more than an expansive sweep of the arm.

The settings were realised exclusively through well-chosen properties – for example, the marquee at the fete was suggested through a short length of bunting – and such economy of style means that you look for the meaning in every detail. Costumes were well chosen to enhance the characterisations, notably in “A Talk in the Park” where we could presume quite a lot about the protagonists before they had a chance to launch into their monologues. The modern lighting installation was well-utilised - although I did notice a darker spot at the fete – while the sound design, notably when Gordon Gosforth is fixing the PA, was excellent.

All in all this was a very polished programme brought to life through skilful direction and excellent characterisation. Buscot Park Theatre is an extraordinary venue, and Faringdon Dramatic Society more than did justice to their surroundings.

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