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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Ladies' Day
Date : 12th November 2021
Venue : Faringdon Junior School

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Ladies' Day" by Amanda Whittington. Thank you also to director Sarah Varnom and assistant director Carolyn Taylor for finding the time to talk to me briefly before the performance. I was interested to note from the programme that the Society has won a number of NODA awards in recent years, and as the evening progressed it became easy to understand why. Full details of NODA's Poster and Programme Awards are available on its website.

Ladies' Day follows the fortunes of a group of four female friends who work together in a fish processing plant in Hull, and who decide to go on a day's excursion to the races. The meeting they plan to attend is Ladies' Day at Royal Ascot, relocated for one year to York. In the course of the day, they find out much more about each other, and themselves, than they had in many years working together in the factory. They also look on as their chosen horses in the Tote accumulator romp home until they have a fortune riding on "Broken Dreams", a rank outsider running in the final race on the card.

The four women aren't just at the heart of the play; they are the play. The piece stands or falls on the quality of their ensemble work and the development of character. The four actors have all been members of the Society for many years, and their easy familiarity made their onstage relationships entirely plausible.

Sarah Couzens played Pearl, who is on the point of leaving the factory to spend more time with her husband in their caravan by the sea, although she insists that she is not retiring. Pearl has lived an unexceptional life of modest ambition, accepting of her lot and pragmatic about her choices. Except of course, that, as the day goes on, her regrets and her secrets begin to emerge. Sarah skilfully portrayed this essentially melancholy character, reserved at first but slowly opening up about her thoughts and feelings. Would she change how her life had turned out? The smile of relief and happiness when she danced with Barry (Richard Lock) towards the very end of the play said so much about painful internal conflicts finally resolved.

Debbie Lock played Jan, a far more assertive character than Pearl and with a tendency towards being judgmental. This was well illustrated in her thoughts about Camilla Parker-Bowles. Debbie's characterisation hinted at Jan's insecurities from an early stage; the breakdown of her marriage as her husband transferred his affection to his Astra and then to the girl living opposite; and her determination that her daughter Clare should have a better life than she did. It's a real skill to act drunk, but Debbie was entirely convincing as the champagne loosened her tongue, broke through her inhibitions, and finally laid her low.

Helen Thrower played Shelley as a brazen, brassy good-time girl, determined to abandon the shackles of her humdrum existence and live the celebrity life. She is the dominant character in the early scenes, and actually appears to be living the dream when she attracts the attention of Jim (also played by Richard Lock), the television presenter anchoring coverage of the race meeting. However, Shelley soon reveals that, far from

being able to splash the cash, she has serious debt problems. Helen did an excellent job of portraying Shelley's gradual abandonment of pretence, brought to a head when it finally dawns on her that Jim's offer to pay her £200 to have dinner with him is not the generous gesture she wanted to believe it was.

Verity Roberts played Linda, the fourth member of the quartet and slightly apart from the others. A little bit younger, a little bit more introverted, and easily the most socially awkward, Linda eschews the champagne in favour of a Coke and seems to be enjoying an unremarkable day out. Inevitably her backstory emerges, as we learn that Linda is not only short of cash, but also in the thrall of her mother. Verity conveyed Linda's awkwardness physically as well as through her dialogue; her stance and her gestures were all very well judged. Her unexpected and rapidly developing relationship with Patrick, one of the jockeys and played by Jack Metcalf, could have seemed implausible in a lesser actor's hands, but this moment of epiphany was very convincing, thanks in part to the way she fiddled with her hat while she was being chatted up.

The five male roles are largely incidental – indeed, it is possible for one actor to play them all. The three actors called on in this production all gave good accounts of themselves, especially when you remember that they typically had a few minutes to establish and develop their characters while the female leads had the entire evening.

David Couzens played Joe, the fish processing plant supervisor, clutching his clipboard and pen but not doing any actual work. David's understated performance portrayed Joe as an ordinary decent bloke, so you could understand why Jan might have found him an object of desire.

Richard Lock captured the essence of Barry, Pearl's illicit lover, portraying him as gentle, reserved, and attentive. However, I felt that Richard wasn't quite on the money in his portrayal of Jim, the television presenter. Jim's on-camera persona was everything you would expect – smooth, personable, professional; what we didn't see was much contrast with his off-camera persona – an egotistical character happy to exploit his celebrity and anyone he meets. Of course, such people get away with their actions by pretending to be somebody they're not, but the references to Jim's darker side that were there at times – the impatience, the weasel words – perhaps needed to be developed into a more consistent aspect of the characterisation. Jim was just a bit too nice – although even Shelley rumbled him when he offered her money while fondling her buttocks.

Jack Metcalf played Patrick, the jockey who Linda meets when she has wandered off on her own. Jack had a convincing Irish accent; his tales from the saddle, and his understanding of the extreme contrast between being amongst life's winners and life's losers provided a useful metaphor as the play entered its final furlong. Jack also played Fred, a ticket tout with an admirable, or should that be despicable, air of detachment.

The play was staged in a junior school hall with a good-sized stage. Any limitations imposed by the venue were stylishly overcome. A cyclorama was cleverly lit to suggest the fish processing plant or the open expanses of York racecourse on a summer's day, and just a few properties were sufficient to evoke the beer tent or the side of the racetrack. One or two of the lighting changes, particularly those used to highlight asides to the audience, could have been more subtle. The principals' costumes hit the right note for Ladies' Day, and Pearl's handbag was perfect. It's always a problem staging scenes set in ostensibly noisy environments, as you don't want the actors shouting at each other for too long, so I understood why the factory noise was faded out; but might it have been faded out more slowly, to the point of imperceptibly? While on the subject of the factory, I

thought the women were a bit too deliberate in their fish-filleting; surely after many years they would have been able to perform this task without paying much attention to it?

The dialogue was pacy and cues were picked up promptly, even if I never quite felt that the principal characters were completing each other's sentences. However, the principals did manage to tuck into their picnic without disrupting the flow of the conversation.

Amanda Whittington's script is full of insights into human nature, as well as amusing period details. I particularly enjoyed the references to Kelly's wedding, all "Hi ho silver lining" and punch-ups in the car park. Director Sarah Varnom drew out these insights and details with her tight-knit and talented team of principals, and the very high quality of their ensemble work was the most admirable aspect of this production.

Faringdon Dramatic Society is clearly an important part of its community, and the evening had an old-fashioned appeal, complete with a raffle drawn in the interval. The annual pantomime is apparently a highlight of the year, so it is a great pity that next year's has had to be cancelled because of understandable concerns over Covid.

And did "Broken Dreams" win the final race to secure a life-changing sum of money for Pearl, Jan, Shelley and Linda? Of course not. That's not what happens in real life ... is it?

Andrew Walter

13th November 2021