



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Shinfield Players Theatre
Production : Ravenscroft
Date : 27/04/23
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre
Reviewer : Nick Humby

Show Report

Overall Production Impression

When you read that Don Nigro has written over 400 plays and you have never heard of his work before you naturally wonder why. Indeed, this gothic thriller constantly leaves you wondering why as the Inspector navigates his way through the twists and turns of the suspects explanations. The author requires the play to be set in a black box with limited scene setting furnishings and requires that the five suspects sit up stage when not being interviewed by the Inspector. The implication appears to be that the audience is meant to constantly speculate what is real and what is fantasy and to think nothing is as it first seems. It is a wordy play with lengthy duologues and requires a cast that can breathe life into the assorted characters to keep the audience engaged and fortunately Shinfield players has a fine cast of six who manage to make sense of the bizarre and absurd twists that the Inspector uncovers.

Set in 1905 rural England in a snowstorm the script feels like a draft that needs rewrites and edits. When the inspector arrives there is no body, why? The Inspector helps himself uninvited to vast quantities of wine while on duty that no one queries, why? When the lighting state changes you wonder why? These distractions constantly leave the audience speculating on the reality which may be the intention but somewhat detracts from the fine performances. This appears to be Theatre of the Absurd where a group of characters

are trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to illogical jumps where the audience is left to draw their own conclusions.

Cast

The cast of six wonderfully create their different characters, make the twist, and turns in their stories seem credible and react facially and in their body language beautifully to the questioning and responses they hear. Most impressive is the Inspector who on three weeks rehearsals copes magnificently with the long wordy investigations and if he uses the script concealed in his notebook at all does so with great skill and without hesitation.

Ashleigh Wells is magnificent as Inspector Ruffing, following his success as Inspector Drake last year, and stepping in at short notice to the part. He establishes himself as the methodical detective cross referencing each enquiry with a questioning and suspicious tone. His copious notetaking looks realistic and allows him to glance down into his notebook but maintains the character and engagement with the suspects well. His mood changes through frustration, anger, drunkenness and then sobering up are convincingly portrayed and arouse our sympathy as he struggles to unlock the mystery. We too feel his frustration with the explanations we hear. His changing relationships with three Ladies of the house (as opposed to the servants) is very well played as he tries to unpick their game playing and responds to their different changes of approach.

When he put the notebook down it gave him the freedom to express himself so much better and let fly in his portrayal. It was an impressive and solid performance that carries the show.

Lara Savory as Mrs Ravenscroft quickly establishes herself as the mistress of the house with her well-spoken posh accent and seems to be orchestrating the revelations. She too delivers revealing dramatic changes of mood and facial expression as she tries to

manipulate the Inspector and the truth. There are moments of delightful comedy in her performance, and perfect comic timing when she talks at cross purposes with the Inspector.

Alana Wells as Marcy is equally strong creating the most reliable suspect and adding wonderful facial reactions and body language changes in responding to the Inspector questioning which reinforce her character and her attitudes. She was a very English sounding Viennese immigrant. There was good contrast too between her indignation and later affection and caring for the unconscious Inspector with her changes of emotion delivered seamlessly. I enjoyed her performance immensely.

Millie Naylor plays the most complex character Gillian, who comes across at first as a young woman with an excitable childlike innocence, then as gameplaying temptress and tease and finally as a wilful manipulator. There are lovely touches like fiddling constantly with her dress or the coy and doe-eyed looks she gives the Inspector. There is a sense that she is on edge of madness or that she is living in a fantasy world and not responsible for her actions. It was a very compelling complete performance.

Dolly played by **Sami Sharp** presented as the most straightforward character, a giggly young maid, enthusiastic but not very bright so that at times she seems silly or confused. Her characterisation was lovely, and she was very endearing as the ditzy maid. She has the best line in the play "I'm just a poor orphan, ask my Mother". The strand of hair hanging down over her face was a nice touch of characterisation.

Mrs French played by **Barbara Richards** was another very well drawn characterisation as the west country Housekeeper who has an appealing charm as the loyal and trustworthy servant of the family. Her characterisation was perfect, and her west country burr worked perfectly for her character. Her dislike of Dolly was clear and her

physicality with the “silly maid” well delivered. As written, she never quite makes the status of suspect, and we could have seen more of her.

Creatives

Maggie Smith and Cate Naylor directed the play as guided by the script and author which results in most of the dialogue being spoken on the forestage and around the chaise longue as each character came in for the Inspector’s questioning. The staircase which is almost a seventh character itself dominates the stage. The directors effectively used it for entrances and exits of the women, by Gillian as she emphasises her theories and stories and to good effect in the final diorama hinting at what happens next. There is good interaction between the characters and the changes in tone and attitudes were very well drawn out. More could have been made to hint of the “white lady” ghost or to play up the sense of fantasy and ethereal qualities rather than focus on the ladies’ conspiratorial games playing.

The set

The set design was simple and effective. The gold frames on the proscenium walls could have been replicated on stage in the black box walls to give the set a more interesting feel or even mirrors to reflect the quote in the programme. The staircase was very effective although the nice touch of painted perspective was not strong enough to be seen in row F, particularly in the dim lighting at the back of the stage. The limited furnishing looked appropriate with an excellent decanter set with red wine a lovely chaise longue and a very effective breakable vase.

The lighting and sound by **Matt Chiswick and Graeme Rhodes** may have had some technical issues on the night I went with a strobing white light early on and then some

strange uneven colour changes across the forecast which distracted rather than enhanced the mood. The UV Light on the chaise longue certainly helped set the scene as the play opened. The later white spotlight on the character centre stage was very effective and worked well. The choice of music at various times helped set the period and ethereal quality of the play and added a little to the tension and mystery.

Costumes by **Cate Naylor** were appropriate to each character and the period with a good touch of the pocket watch chain for the Inspector and good differentiation of class and age for the ladies.

The programme design by **Maggie Smith** was clear and useful although the script quotes included were unclear, were they the characters favourite line? It is always interesting to have some insight into the cast backgrounds.

As always there was a warm welcome from the Front of House team led by **Carol** and **Graham Vockins** which together with the great car park and spacious toilets makes this a lovely venue to visit.

This was an interesting play, though not quite the “endlessly unfolding mystery” promised, which the Shinfield Players cast performed very well creating intriguing and mystifying characters with twist and turns in moods and relationships as the ever-changing puzzle unravelled. It made for an enjoyable evening with some really excellent performances to admire. Thank you.

Nick

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