



Society : Riverside Players
Production : A Bunch Of Amateurs
Date : 24th March 18
Venue : Memorial Hall, Old Windsor
Report by : Terry Hunt

Show Report

Thank you to Riverside Player for the invitation to attend your production of A Bunch Of Amateurs, and the subsequent hospitality.

In conversation with Director Trish Weller, I understand this to be her first foray into the world of Direction, and has perhaps learned there's more to it than one might otherwise imagine?

Overall the performance had a good pace and the frequent 'daily' changes of clothes helped with conveying the passing of time. There were some good touches of 'business' with cast often pottering in the background with lamps, props, ladders etc however I felt a lack of imaginative direction, with the rehearsal scenes in particular, feeling like more of the same, with the same energy. I feel the main difference needed was during the scene when watching excerpts from what was the Stratford Players actual performance of King Lear. The stage didn't look different enough and the vignettes would have been more effective if dramatically different from each other. ie. dramatically differing lighting each time or costumes/props perhaps; the appearance of a different setting/cast. etc. I felt that section needed something cleverer, as it just appeared as if the cast were wondering about the stage quoting, rather than watching excerpts from what was supposed to be the entire performance of King Lear.

I'm not entirely sure the accompaniment of the Fools Song really added anything. I suspect only keen enthusiasts of Shakespeare would appreciate the relevance of it being from King Lear, and as there was no practical reason for it (ie covering a scene change), I feel its point may have been lost.

However, all told, it was tight and a well rehearsed production which moved along swiftly and held the audiences attention, so well done to Trish, no doubt supported by an experienced production team, for putting together an enjoyable evening of entertainment.

One performance point I thought was missing was the lack on any Suffolk accents. Not that it would have been required by everyone, but I imagine that at least Mary Plunkett and Dennis Dobbins would have at been born and bred locals, and the accent does lend itself to humour!

Scenically Trish also did well in her basic design of creating a barn/village hall setting. The entrance looked very much like many a community hall entrance, with its notices etc. I most certainly appreciated the full box set, rather than just a back cloth (or flats) and fabric legs as off stage masking. It helps with the feeling on being IN the location rather than look AT it.

The wood effect painting, although a little on the heavy side, was consistent and well done.

The dual purpose door, with accompanying 'Home Sweet Home/Toilet' sign served its purpose well, however, I wonder if the door flat may have been of more use as a reversible, free standing book flat, to use as a backing for the B&B and Physiotherapy room? The addition of furniture to depict a particular space can work if lighting will allow the rest of the setting to more or less disappear. However in a smaller space, ambient light makes it difficult to avoid, looking as though we're still in the barn.

I enjoyed the attention to detail, adding items not especially required, but as set dressing, such as the fire extinguisher and theatre lamps. Something RP does well.

Even though there were limited SFX, sound quality was very good. What I assume to have been Respighi (?) is a good choice of musical accompaniment for anything connected with Shakespeare.

I wasn't aware of many off stage sound effects (or they were SO subtle I missed them) which may have been worth considering, such as a car arriving outside for the impending arrive of Mr Steel, or general 'kitchen' noises (cup and saucer, kettle whistle) in the B&B. While not necessary, they're nice touches and adds to the setting. They would have kept Mark Hastings and John Wesson a bit busier too, especially as they are technically competent enough to get the effects right! I was actually convinced there WAS an ambulance outside.

Similarly, Jonathan Stacey's lighting was balanced, functional and well done, but again, I feel more could have been added to add a bit of drama to the 'performance'. Much as there was a change (a red wash) dramatically different states for each vignette would have added extra visual interest.

LX and SFX both did a good job, however I feel that because Riverside Players' technical ability is very good, both could be directed with a bit more creativity.

Tom Weller gave a solid performance as Jefferson Steele, with a good, consistent accent and was very confident with his lines which were delivered at a good pace. Tom made good use of the stage and gave the whole performance some 'gusto'. Although he didn't appear to be old enough to have a grown up daughter, the relationship with both Jessica and the Stratford Player developed nicely as things progressed. I would like to have seen a bit more light and shade in Tom's performance. Even a fading Hollywood bigshot has his 'normal' days.

I wasn't sure about Dorothy Nettle's blue head band, which looked a bit odd, however I was very fond of Dorothy, as played by Charlotte Moore. When not able to trade on being a bit of an eccentric in some way, 'straight' characters are best served as being believable, which Charlotte achieved nicely. Confidently delivered diplomacy and a subtle line in sarcasm. As a multi-tasking pragmatist, holding it all together, I felt that maybe Charlotte HAS directed before. A very enjoyable performance.

Simon Arnold as Nigel Dewbury, in his varying, smarter attire, accompanied by a collection of ties and a cravat, limned a pompous lawyer, but didn't necessarily portray that in his body language, suggesting that Nigel isn't quite as self confident as he likes others to think he is.

Simon does subtle well, and delivered some wonderfully executed comedy lines (eg. "I think you'll find it's pronounced 'arsehole'), however I feel Simon has the ability to have brought out more character in Nigel.

I feel for sure that Alex Taggart would have benefited from playing Denis Dobbins with a Suffolk accent. An amiable handyman, full of 'helpful' ideas, characterfully plods his way along, which adds to nature of a man clearly used to taking life at a slower pace! Turning up each day in a different outfit, be it his red plaid shirt and work belt, or a grey hoodie, he's a man who dresses for comfort. Denis's suggestions for delivering the line 'Out vile jelly' with onions and ping pong balls, were well implemented with great timing. An all round nice performance, but Alex could have picked up lines a bit quicker at times.

Jill Dady's Mary Plunkett had a lovely array of moods and emotions. Be it star stuck fawning over the Hollywood star, busying herself at the B&B, or simply 'miffed', Mary made me smile throughout.

Josie Blackburn had a good Californian accent as Jessica Steele and even her line delivery had Californian intonation and expression, so well done for that. All of Josie's facial expressions and reactions were very much in the correct vein for what was being expressed at any given time, ie a disappointed daughter, or an enthusiastic stand in for the performance, but being put down by her

disparaging father, and eventually the acceptance of a new relationship with Jefferson, however, Josie can afford to expand on her performance and make it a LITTLE bit 'bigger'.

Lorna Cottrill strutted confidentially as Lauren Bell. As the brewery agent, Lorna came across as looking and acting the part, but I found the character a bit confusing as things progressed. Perhaps this is partly in the writing, but I seemed to lose quite a lot of what was going on with her. Perhaps Lorna's portrayal made her appear TOO professional and restrained. Perhaps Lauren Bell needs to be bolder? The massage looked relaxing though!!

In all, an enjoyable and well produced production, and those seated around me seemed to agree. Very well done.

Terry Hunt. NODA Rep, London Region, - Dist 14