



Society : Riverside Players  
Production : **BELOW STAIRS**  
Date : Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2014  
Venue : Memorial Hall, Old Windsor  
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

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## Report

*Below stairs* is a musical written for amateur stage the story being written by Trevor Pilling and music created by Alan Lewis.

It could be described as a musical version of *Downton Abbey/Upstairs Downstairs* as it is set "*Below Stairs*" in a large London house in 1914 and follows the exploits of Lucy, an ambitious maid, and the impact of the First World War on her life.

This was the first time I have seen Riverside Players perform a musical production and was impressed with the depth of talent within this small group of performers. I thought this production was imaginatively set, superbly cast and wonderfully presented. Excellent singing and top class acting ensured that I thoroughly enjoyed this show.

The main challenge to this production is the constant scene changes (kitchen, park, backstage of the theatre, on stage of the theatre, seaside, trench in the First World War) but the players handled this very well by use of painted drops and tabs.

I was delighted to be invited to watch the last night of the production, which ironically, was exactly 100 years to the day that Archduke Ferdinand was shot, starting a series of events leading the outbreak of the First World War.

### **Emily Latchett (CHLOE PICTON)**

Starts off the show with the first song and my goodness how well she did! Her character was nicely defined and movement very appropriate to her station. There were some lovely facial expressions – especially towards the end when she had to make the decision between staying at the house as a maid or, leaving to help Lucy. **Very well done!**

### **Ben (NIAMH PARKYN)**

Niamh performed a lovely performance as the kitchen boy. I did think that they could have changed the gender of her performance to "girl" as I am sure it would not have made any difference to the plot. I was impressed by her clarity and volume – for one so young this can be a challenge but one that Niamh accomplished without any issues – **well done!**

### **Sally Coombes (SAMANTHA SOMERVILLE)**

A good character performance by Samantha as the maid Sally and she showed her class when singing in "*One Brief Moment*" and as one of the dancers in "*My Name is Arlette*".

**Albert Ecclestone (ALEX TAGGART)**

A good understated performance by Alex as the footman. He showed that he could hold tune too and did very well in the song *“One Brief Moment”*.

**Lucy Ambleside (VICKI ARNOLD)**

I have seen Vicki several times over the years and have been impressed with her performances but this one was the best I have seen. It is a mammoth part and is either on stage or changing costumes ready for her next scene. Her singing was first class and clearly understood her character. Showing her ambition from the offset in her song *“Nobody is better than me”*; gently flirting with the three men in her life (Tom, Gerald, Albert). The role required not only a convincing “cockney” accent, but French and American which again Vicki delivered with perfection. **This was a wonderful performance – very well done indeed.**

**George Parker (ROGER BLACKMAN)**

Roger gave an appealing performance in the small but enjoyable character role as the servant George. With well pointed lines and good volume, Roger oozes experience with a well crafted role.

**Alexander Town (ARNOLD PAGE)**

This was a lovely character performance by Arnold as the head of the household, Town. Some nicely portrayed mannerisms. He showed good understanding of the part, conveying a convincing no-nonsense, old fashioned person. His appearance with his glasses and costume looked ideal for the period. Arnold also sung very competently in *“Order in our Lives”* and *“One Brief Moment”*. **Excellent performance.**

**Doris Lovegrove (SUSAN PICKLES)**

A lovely character performance from Susan as Doris, the dominating head cook. She showed some lovely touches of humour, especially when we realise that she is on the “fiddle”. Her accent was sustained throughout the show. I thought there were touches of Sybil Fawty of the working classes in her characterisation, which worked very well indeed.

**Emmeline Pankhurst (FLO HARDY)**

This is Flo’s first performance for Riverside Players, and a very impressive cameo role it was too. Her performance as the suffragette protagonist Emmeline Pankhurst was very well defined and contrasted very well with her other role as a servant. Her rousing song *“Votes for Women”* was very well delivered. **Well done.**

**Bert (DAVID ALLEN)**

**Fred (RAY SIBERINI)**

This was a lovely partnership and a good piece of casting. They delivered some good comedy (particularly in act one scene 2 with the suffragettes) and produced an enjoyable performance in a well sung and enjoyable song *“Ridiculous”*.

**Tom Snodgrasse (NATHANAEL PAGE)**

Nathanael produced an excellent performance as one of the love interests in the show. He showed good understanding of the script too, delivering the irony of his lines with good weight (for example

about women getting the vote). He produced a confident and accomplished singing voice and was always in control. **A fine performance.**

**Edward Waterflower (SIMON ARNOLD)**

Simon once again delivers a believable character as the rogue Edward Waterflower. This was the first time I heard Simon sing and he produced a more than capable effort in "*Would You Like To Take A Walk?*"

**Gerald Land (NADEEM VALECHA)**

This was Nadeem's first performance for a long while and he produced a good understanding of the requirements to the part of the impresario and theatre owner. I did feel that some of the gestures and line delivery were slightly over delivered, but given his flamboyant character, it worked well.

**Maude (SANDRA PARKYN)**

Sandra produced a fine performance as Maude, Gerald Land's assistant/theatre dresser. Sandra produced good volume and good movement around the stage.

**Maids & Suffragettes**

The chorus of maids started with a good opening scene with lots of action and looking busy, with people sweeping and cleaning whilst singing "*Below Stairs*".

**Director (KAY SMITH)**

I think Kay and her production team can be very pleased with an outstanding show. The casting was spot on, the cast were clearly well rehearsed with all entrances and exits smoothly executed. The characters were very well defined and the movement around stage was not too fussy but interesting and appropriate to the requirements of the scene.

**Choreographer (VICKI ARNOLD & KAY SMITH)**

There were some contrasting moves that were set that made all the songs interesting and engaging to watch. The simple movement to "*Votes for Women*" was particularly effective as was the bustling opening number "*Below Stairs*".

**Musical Director (MARK HASTINGS)**

All of the principal singers performed very well and I was impressed with chorus who produced an energetic and tuneful performance. All of the cast were well drilled and produced a high quality show. There were some nicely worked harmonies, particularly noticeable in "*Order in our lives*".

**Stage management (JOHN WESSON)**

The stage was very well managed by John and his back stage crew with swift, quiet and efficient scene changes.

**Set Design (MARK HASTINGS & KAY SMITH)**

The players extended the apron even further, jutting out an additional apron at centre of the stage.

Most of the action centred around the kitchen of an Edwardian household. A raised platform with two sets of stairs, left and right, gave the set some different levels. The kitchen was very furnished with authentic looking props (brass pots and pans, a period cooker, table and chairs). It would have liked to have seen a window at the back to show that the room was below stairs but this is a small point. The seaside scene was decorated with appropriate period deck chairs and the trench scene added some additional set to indicate its location.

### **Sound (MARK HASTINGS)**

With no room for a live orchestra, the society used backing music but this worked very well and the balance between the music and the mic'd singers was very well defined. I heard every word from the singers. The sound effects for the battle scene were perfect, and the levels also very well defined.

### **Lighting (ROGER LEWISTON & GARY OLIVER)**

With the additional staging area I was intrigued how it could all be lit – but this was accomplished with the usual skill that I have come to expect from this society. The lighting plot was imaginatively set with lovely blues to show the darkness at the beginning with some candle lights. The trench scene was appropriately darker and then the “battle” scene was superbly lit with flashing white and red lights through the smoke.

### **Costumes**

One of the challenges in performing period pieces is that you have to find/make costumes from that period. All of the costumes looked appropriate to the period, looked clean and pressed and fitted the actors.

### **Properties**

All looked appropriate to the period. I like the attention to detail, like the newspaper being of the period. I did note the lack of a tea strainer and would not have thought they would have poured tea directly out of the pot into the cups.

### **Makeup**

I thought all the makeup was appropriately applied – I could see all of the facial expressions under the lights.

### **Front of house**

Once again my wife and I were made very welcome by an efficient front of house team on a busy evening. It was lovely to see so many people to watch this unknown show.

### **Programme**

The free twelve page programme had all the relevant information that was needed. A good size font was used so that the centre pages showing the synopsis and songs could be read in the half light. The biographies were useful guide on revealing the experience of the cast. I would loved to have seen a cast photo (in their costumes and the lovely set) but the bio photos were of good quality for me to recognise who was who.

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I thoroughly enjoyed this rare and unknown musical and hope that it is to be performed a lot more by other societies over the next four years as we commemorate those awful events of 100 years ago. I am already looking forward to seeing the pantomime *Sleeping Beauty* in December later this year. Thank you once again for the invitation to see a very well performed show.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Bird', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Gordon Bird**  
***NODA representative***  
***London Region, District 14***