



Society : Riverside Players
Production : **JOKING APART**
Date : Saturday 23rd March 2013
Venue : The Memorial Hall, Old Windsor
Report by : Gordon Bird, NODA Representative, Area 14

Report

On Saturday 23rd March, I was delighted to be invited to watch Riverside Player' production of the Alan Ayckbourn's classic, "*Joking Apart*".

The play was premiered in Scarborough in January 1978 and then moved to the West End in 1979 where it received good reviews but poor audiences and closed making a loss. This particular play is set on Richard and Anthea, a happily married and wealthy couple. But it is also concerns about how, unwittingly, their lives and actions affect the feelings and lives of their closest friends over a 12 year period.

Riverside Players brought the play up to date, starting the first act in the year 2000 and finishing the last scene in the summer of 2012 and it worked very well indeed. The play is a focus on characters and their relationships and these issues are relevant today as they were in 1979.

Alan Ayckbourn has been commented to say that this is one of his favourite plays but you can understand why audiences are not so keen. It is not an out and out comedy and is a lot darker than some of his plays.

This production had wonderful pace throughout, and as I have become accustomed now with this group, an excellent set design and superb lighting and sound effects that would not be out of place in a professional theatre.

SIMON ARNOLD (Richard)

The character of Richard can do no wrong – has what seems to be a perfect marriage, happy family, is doing well at his job and has that knack of always making the right business decision. Simon competently portrayed this character and it was only afterwards I was informed that Simon had to step into the role owing to a withdrawal of the original actor because of working commitments. It is a testament to the skill of Simon that I was totally unaware as the performance seemed a perfect role. A believable, contained performance.

CHARLOTTE MOORE (Anthea)

This is the second time I have seen Charlotte on stage and was impressed how relaxed she looks.. She has splendid stage presence and pertinent line delivery, pointing her lines perfectly. Her interaction offstage to the children was very believable. The scene when Hugh reveals his feelings for Anthea was very well acted – with first-rate reactions by Charlotte. This was a very good performance indeed.

ALAN PAYN (Hugh)

Alan produced a good performance as the shy next door neighbour vicar. He portrayed his subdued tolerance of his wife with delicate subtlety but his best moment came when he professed his love for

Anthea. You could see a whole range of emotions on his face that were masterfully played. A lovely, well observed characterisation.

VICKI ARNOLD (Louise)

Louise, the wife of the vicar, is another one of the unwittingly casualties of Richard and Anthea. Over the course of the 12 years we see her character slip further into depression, and anxiety felt by her were sensitively handled by Vicki. The final scene was exceptionally well played, showing her heightened state and superbly timed manic laughter. Another fine performance from a talented actress.

RICHARD WHALEY (Sven)

What an excellent performance by Richard as the business associate and friend to Richard and Anthea. He sustained a creditable Scandinavian accent throughout the play. His transformation in Act 2 scene 2 following his health scare was convincingly portrayed, moving slowly and, to my eyes, actually looked tired and weary from the toils of his illness. A superbly crafted characterisation.

KAY SMITH (Olive)

This was a lovely characterisation by Kay as the wife of Sven. Ayckbourn writes very deep characters that the more you learn, the more you realise the different layers to the character. I felt Kay really understood the character and got underneath Olive. Her relationship with Sven looked genuine, the caring wife, the nagging wife but obviously a loving wife. Her line delivery was superb, showing some lovely shades to her tone. This was a polished performance.

ALEX TAGGART (Brian)

This was a much larger role than that of the cameraman in "The Bandwagon" and required a lot more from Alex. The role of Brian, Richard's friend and work colleague, required some subtle feelings for Anthea that I felt was missing. Maybe some awkward moments when speaking to her or some more obvious glances at Anthea may have helped? There were lovely facial expressions, especially when he was trying to make conversation with Mandy. I would like to have seen some of the actions a little bigger because although I had the fortunate of being in the front row, some of those further back may have missed them. Alex's movement around the stage looked well rehearsed and looked perfectly natural. His understanding of the text was well thought out with some very well pointed lines. Overall I was impressed how much Alex has improved and look forward to seeing him in more roles in the future.

LENA VANTOL (Melody), AMIE MACURA (Mandy) & SAMANTHA SOMERVILLE (Mo)

All three of Brian's "friends" offered different but effective characters. LENA as the Canadian "ice" woman was Brian's first friend in act one scene one. Her accent wandered a little but on the whole it was a credible performance with good clear diction from LENA. AMIE's Mandy was wonderfully realistic. It is not easy to sit throughout a whole scene with only a couple of lines yet AMIE accomplished the feat with ease. She immersed herself completely into her drawing yet still managed to pick up her cues and offer the right gesture or look at the right time. And finally, SAMANTHA's drunken Mo was accurately portrayed and at one moment I genuinely believed she was going to be sick! This was another strong performance considering that this for only one scene.

LORNA COTTRILL (Debbie)

Although only a small part in the last scene, Lorna acted the part of Richard and Anthea's 18 year old daughter perfectly. Her dance at the end of the show was very well done and perfect for the role of the daughter who has everything – showing that she did not have a care in the world. It is a shame that this is likely to be Lorna's last part for a while as she commences her university education later in the year and I sincerely hope that she continues her interest in the theatre, both whilst she is away and later in life.

Director (SIMON ARNOLD)

Rehearsal Assistants (SUSAN PICKLES and SAMANTHA SOMERVILLE)

The directing team can be pleased with the results of their labour. The pace was very well maintained throughout the show, with cues lines being picked up accurately by a skilled cast. On the whole the play was well cast although I did feel the parts of Brian and Melody were the wrong age group, however, this did not matter as both of their roles were very well presented. There was a couple of blocking issues when Anthea blocked Sven and Olive (when she was pouring drinks in the final scene) but other than that, entrances and exits and stage movement worked well.

Stage management (JONATHAN STACEY) & crew

The stage was very well managed on this night with swift scene changes covered by appropriate scene setting music to denote a change of year. Properties were efficiently removed and replaced in good time without disturbing the pace of the show.

Set

Riverside Players always produce a very sturdy, well built, well designed set and this one was no exception. They opened up the acting area by extending the set out down stage right and down stage left. All the scenes take place in the garden of Richard and Anthea over a 12 year period and different seasons (two being in the summer whilst the other two are in winter). A sky blue backdrop had painted white clouds that were well lit to be shown for the daytime scenes and washed out for the night scenes. Down stage right was the outside of the house with the back door being used as an entrance and stage left had the corner of the tennis court. The set was suitably dressed with general garden paraphernalia.

**Lighting (ROGER LEWISTON) &
Sound (MARK HASTINGS)**

Once again the sound and lighting team have produced an excellent design and operation that overcame the challenges set by the author. The synchronisation of the lighting and sound effects for the fireworks in the first act was spot on and provided a very realistic view. Equally impressive were the synchronisation of the tennis shots and the accompanying sound effect of the ball being hit by a tennis racket – linking the effect with the on stage performer and with the one off stage. I did not see one cue missed. This talented team once again delivered and provided a truly professional operation.

Costumes

All the costumes were well chosen to reflect the range of characters. The large hat for Mandy, the over the top dress for Louise in the final scene were perfect choices. The variety of costumes that each actor had to wear adequately reflected the scene, season and character. I liked the reindeer pullover for Brian in Act 2 and Sven's tennis attire for the same scene. It was clear, as in every other aspect of this fine production, a lot of thought and effort had been put into the detail. Well done.

Properties

All of the properties were applicable to the show. I liked the idea of the change of stage dressing inside the house for each scene, accurately reflecting the season. I was pleased to see the level of detail to ensure that fluids were on glasses and jugs and that not only was soup poured but was warm (and smelt delicious). One small thing, I wondered if Richard and Anthea would have had the same garden furniture for eight years?

Makeup

The makeup was appropriately applied and I saw every gesture from the cast under the various lighting plots. The makeup on Louise's character for the final scene reminded me of a young child's first attempt at putting on makeup and it was perfect for her characterisation.

Front of house

A large, almost full house was in attendance on the Saturday evening but the front of house team was excellent and my partner and I were very well looked after by Susan Pickles.

Programme

A six page free colour programme covered all the essential elements one requires from a programme. It had a cast list conveniently located in the middle. There were also clear, colour photographs of each cast member and an advert for the next production. I would have liked some biography information about the cast, but that is just me being nosy!

Although this is not my favourite Ayckbourn play, I did enjoy this superb production by Riverside Players and look forward to seeing "*Fools Rush In*" in June.

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