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Society : Riverside Players
Production : The Box
Date : 23th March 19
Venue : Memorial Hall, Old Windsor
Report by : Terry Hunt

Show Report

Thank you for the invitation to report on the Riverside Players production of The Box. Described as a 'charming' play, I found myself smiling most of the way through it, although there were few 'laugh out loud' lines.

The set was a bit like a history lesson. I was impressed by the detail such as the brick exterior, the shelves stocked with period kitchen goods (perhaps a little TOO well placed), the butler sink with running water, and curtains under the work unit. The water, and such thoughtful details as the coat hooks in the hall, both of which COULD have been avoided, are the type of things which make a good set 'real' and are always worth incorporating if time and budget allow.

Despite the kitchen table being set in the centre of the stage, there didn't seem to be any problems with sight-lines, blocking anyone performing further upstage, even when the table was occupied. The general layout helped make good use of the entire stage.

Wall colours and fabric used were all fitting for the period.

The design is what makes the set work (or not!), but the set dressing is what adds the credibility, so very well done to the 'team' for the set and the dressing.

In terms of props, tying in the with set dressing, a good effort had been made, however, while accepting the kitchen table wouldn't have been set out as a mediaeval feast for 'tea', I felt the table was still a little sparse.

Scene refreshes, however, were fast and efficient, looking to be well orchestrated by Vicki and Simon Arnold

There were no great demands on lighting or sound, but in terms of Roger Lewiston's LX, the set was well lit, there were no issues with dark areas or shadows and cues appeared to be well timed. I missed the lack of tab warmers as they do focus attention on the stage, once the house lights dim, and before the tabs open.

Mark Hasting's sound was a good quality and well operated with appropriate choices of music. More a point of direction perhaps, but as the tabs opened after the interval, music was playing which 'Celia' was dancing along to, the music just faded out. A nice touch would have been to either fade the music and change the tone, so it sounded as though it was coming from the radio, or for the radio to be switched off. What happened, lacked continuity.

Overall, costumes were suitable and evocative of the era. Corduroys, cardigans, braces and elbow patches worked well for the men, with a trendier looks for Donald, with more of the white T-shirt, and black trousers styling.

Georges watch was a bit too modern looking.

For the women, it was nice to see fashions which were age appropriate for the era. Groovy chic, Celia in 60's contemporary styles and patterns, although I do feel her make up could have been more exaggerated as there were very specific looks which went with the fashion, but we didn't see from the front. Alice, a little less up with fashion, being more functional as a mother, in her styling. Mabel's look was wonderfully full of stereotypical character in her house coat, polka dot, rollers head scarf and 'cat eye' glasses.

Well done to all for a collective effort, which worked well.

Alex Taggart, with silvered hair, passed admirably for Brian Parker, a middle aged dad of two young adults, set in his ways in a rather unremarkable domestic situation and seemingly contented with the relative drudgery of his life. Alex delivers lines with a confident pace and lots of expression, but could pay more attention to pauses and intonation as this can add a lot of light, shade and meaning to dialogue! I enjoyed the neighbourly banter with 'George'. The meaningless rivalry between them came across well. Two men who, despite their friendly antagonism at times, actually quite like each others company.

I appreciated the addition of some muddiness to Alex's face, given that he'd been digging in the garden, but his hands were spotless, which notably, bore no wedding ring.

Similarly, the relationship with Brian's wife Alice, as played by Serena Kelly, had a very traditional, old family values, feel, whereby she quietly wears the trousers. Serena was the cheerful, mostly upbeat, mum, who busies herself with daily household chores. There were times I felt Serena could have done with a bit more to do and taking command of the kitchen a bit more, bossing others around bit.

However exasperated Alice may have been over the presence of The Box in her kitchen, it did feel like there was a loving and loyal bond between her and Brian.

It may not have been such a good move for Trish Weller to double up as director and Grandma Parker, as 'Grandma' lacked any expression or personality. Lines were delivered clearly, however there was a lot of comedy to had from what I felt should have been a completely dotty and cantankerous Grandma character, in addition to the potential for amusing reactions and interaction from the rest of the family.

I liked the difference in attitude between both Donald (Tom Weller) and Celia (Lorna Cottrill) when conversing with each other, which was quite normal compared to the exchanges with their 'parents', when there was a hint of adolescent over confidence. It felt very 'true'.

As would have been usual at the time, Celia was helping her mother in some of the more particle chores about the house, like a housewife in waiting, while Donald was more inclined to avoid such helpfulness, instead, resorting to 'smart' remarks!

Tom gave a solid and confident performance, however some line delivery was played to the audience..at which point there's less of a connection with the cast.

Lorna's performance was very natural. Her movement about the set had a sense of familiarity, with prop handling appearing to be second nature. Watching Lorna perform is like wearing slippers. Very comfortable. I feel Lorna has a natural ability so challenging herself in terms of character types may involve stepping out of her comfort zone in the future, but I'm sure she's up to the challenge!

Roger Blackman gave an extremely enjoyable, natural performance as Gorge Biggs, which was also very comfortable to watch. Roger exudes a stillness and calmness on stage and delivered his lines

with varying speed, volume and intonation depending on the moment. Such an interesting variation in the speech pattern makes for interesting listening and helps set the mood of the moment!

The relationship between George and Mabel (Kay Smith) was another which was totally believable. Kay's characterisation was lovely, and subtly expressive. Comical without playing for laughs! It's a shame Mabel didn't feature more!!!

The pace of the production kept moving ok, and attention was kept throughout, however I did feel as though direction needed tightening up in places. The opening sequence of voices off was a bit too long, for instance. There's no reason why it couldn't have been broken up with a bit of business with some coming and going ie, Brian, popping in to look for his missing gardening gloves, found on the kitchen table, then popping back seconds later to hurriedly sweep up the mud, left by his shoes. That type of thing. I can't remember the dialogue well enough, but most likely, the dialogue could have continued while one is inside, and the other outside? While action being relative to the dialogue is important, looking for opportunities to make it more interesting will help with the visuals.

As always with Riverside Players, production values for The Box were excellent and made for a most enjoyable evening.

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