

The Rivals

By Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Illminster Entertainment Society

Friday 8th October 2010

The Play

The Rivals, is a comedy of manners in five acts. Sheridan wrote it when he was a young newly-wed aged 23. It was first performed in Covent Garden, London on 17 January 1775. It was roundly vilified by both the public and the critics for its length, for its bawdiness and for the character of Sir Lucius O'Trigger being a meanly written role played very badly. Sheridan immediately withdrew the play and in the next 11 days, rewrote the original extensively, including a new preface in which he allowed:

“For my own part, I see no reason why the author of a play should not regard a first night’s audience as a candid and judicious friend attending, in behalf of the public, at his last rehearsal. If he can dispense with flattery, he is sure at least of sincerity, and even though the annotation be rude, he may rely upon the justness of the comment.”

Sheridan also apologized for any impression that O'Trigger was intended as an insult to Ireland. Rewritten and with a new actor in the role of O'Trigger, the play reopened on 28 January to significant acclaim. Indeed, it became a favorite of the royal family, receiving five command performances in ten years, and also in the Colonies (it was George Washington’s favorite play). The play is now considered to be one of Sheridan's masterpieces, and is credited with popularizing the term malapropism.

The play is set in [Bath](#) in the 18th century, a town legendary for conspicuous consumption and fashion at the time. Wealthy, fashionable people went there to "[take the waters](#)", which were believed to have healing properties.

The characters in the play are provincial but imagine themselves to be well to do. The central themes are rivalry and romance, the romance tending to fall into the two extremes of romantic fantasy and obsessive jealousy. The despairing guardians of the young people try hard to get them to conform to their guidance which is much more centered on practical matters like social standing and good family stock.

The play is a classic of restoration comedy and all of the characters are caricatures who address their lines to the audience and each other in an almost pantomime style. It can be quite alien to a modern day audience unless it is directed in such a way that the audience is invited to adopt the mindset of the original 18th century audiences and adjust their reception of the play to take account of a different time and a different social etiquette.

The Illminster production succeeded in doing this and the audience romped along with the ridiculous posturing and extemporizing of the characters giving in to hearty laughter as the play unfolded.

Presentation

With the tabs open upon arrival, the audience were able to fully appreciate the beautifully painted backdrop showing scenes of Bath. How fortunate you were to have the talents of Huy Truong to call upon. Other than that, simple side tabs and a fine selection of trunks and cases were the only set. Good prop acquisition here by Philip and the cast. A decision to go for a minimalist set makes good sense with this play and I started out really appreciating the way the trunks were utilized to represent the furniture in the various residences and locations of Bath. However the luggage was shuffled about a good deal more times than was necessary for the five scenes of the play and in the end became tedious because I could not see the reason for simply changing the position of various items in the line-up at the back of the stage. I wondered if Matt and James, as stage managers, could have speeded this up a bit to help keep the pace of the action going. It is arguable that the same minimalist setting for the interior scenes could have been achieved with one or two pieces of period furniture.

The lighting was good with no blank spots and was atmospheric for the scene changes before returning to the overall wash needed for the action of the play. To this end the scene changes gave Brian Perkins a chance to show off his lighting design in a play that otherwise would not have had many challenges.

Brian and Phillip Wells had selected some suitable restoration music for the pre-play street scene but I wondered why they had not chosen to use street sounds suitable to Bath at that time. Perhaps this would have been hard to find.

The costume was very good, with much of it being hired from professional costumiers in Torquay, who I know have a fine selection of period uniforms in particular. Critically they were well fitting and the cast looked comfortable in them and wore them as if this was their usual attire. There was great attention to detail with boots, hats, neckerchiefs and sword belts all in keeping. Those that appeared to have been made or otherwise collated from store looked good, although one hem had come down, on Lucy's dress as I recall, and had not been repaired, perhaps due to a costume malfunction as the play was about to start? The overall effect however was sumptuous and very pleasing to the eye. No wonder the director decided to treat the audience to them all before the play began so that they concentrated on the action from the outset rather than admiring the costumes. Teresa Ravenscroft had done a good job as wardrobe mistress.

Hair, wigs and makeup were also good. Wigs looked natural which is always a relief. Bad wigs make it so hard to concentrate on what characters are doing. Makeup was unobtrusive with the necessary exceptions of Mrs Malaprop and Acres after his transformation to city dandy. Well done to Vivienne Fletcher.

Production

Philip Wells had succeeded in directing a very entertaining version of this play and one that I preferred to other amateur performances of it that I have seen. Generally the use of the stage was good with grouping ensuring that there was no blocking of characters. There

were intimate tableaux's and good use of the back of the stage particularly during the final scene. There was good movement around the stage but some moments when I felt there was rather too much pacing back and forth without any purpose or point making. This was particularly true of Sir Anthony Absolute and occasionally of Faulkland.

I think that the performance had good pace and energy levels which kept the interest of the audience though I have already mentioned the hiatus that some of the scene changing caused as evidenced by the chatter of the audience.

I felt that the classical comedy of well loved characters like Mrs Malaprop and Sir Anthony Absolute was upheld in this production and the direction of scenes between Lydia Languish and Julia were well observed displaying the shallow and affected attitude of well to do young ladies of the time, in affairs of love. The humour of Faulkland's obsessive introspection and petty jealousy also came across well. The characters made a real connection with the audience in their asides which invited them into the personal perspectives of people from such a different time and class. This was particularly true of Faulkland who somehow managed to get us to see some semblance of reasoning behind his otherwise illogical suspicions.

The duel scene was well choreographed with full use of physical humour, particularly in Acres practicing with his imagined sword skills. Sir Lucius O'Trigger made an excellent "authority" on the art of gentlemanly satisfaction and seemed to be driving the ill prepared heroes into directions they would not have been taking of their own volition.

Entrances and exits were all timely with plenty of "swishing" and "swaggering" as required. There was good dynamic between the crucial pairings; Faulkland and Julia, Lydia and Mrs Malaprop, Captain Absolute and Sir Anthony. Characterisations were good and often very good which was a result of good casting.

All in all this was a sound piece of directing which resulted in a performance that was true to the spirit and traditions of the piece and which pleased a modern audience.

Performances

Eric Beckley as Sir Anthony Absolute

This obviously experienced actor had a lovely resonant speaking voice and great stage presence. He played the part in a suitably bombastic and overbearing manner and really conveyed the old fashioned chauvinism of the time. It is testimony to his skill that he succeeded in making Sir Anthony a second comic role equal in impact to that of the recognised comedy signature of Mrs Malaprop. He struggled with a few of his lines but this can be forgiven because he kept the pace up and upheld the old rule of thumb if you need a prompt take it quickly and get on.

Conan Woodley as Captain Absolute

It was good to see this actor trying something completely different and obviously enjoying himself. He captured the boyish mischievousness with which the son dupes both his father

and his secret fiancé by pretending to be Ensign Beverley. The feigned obedience he showed his father when he realised that the arranged marriage is in fact to be with the girl of his own choosing was well played. He succeeded in convincing us that he was indeed a heroic captain who would respond to the challenge to a duel regardless of whether he believed he had caused a slight to warrant it. The only thing that concerned me was that he occasionally dropped his voice or spoke so rapidly that it was hard to catch the line. His false laughter was very infectious.

Michael Paine as Faulkland

This was an enjoyable performance which succeeded in getting empathy for a rather silly and annoying character. Michael was a little too old to be courting the young and lovely Julia but he somehow made us forget this point. Good use of voice, facial expression, rapport with the audience and stage presence made this a character you wanted to see reappear on the stage. The slight speech impediment and dandy peacock manner of walking were good affectations for the character. He dealt well with the lengthy striding about the stage which could have made the pace drop if he had been less accomplished in sending up this foppish poser.

Marcus Palmer as Acres

This was another very enjoyable performance. This actor played the buffoonish county gentleman with relish and sensitivity. He was thoroughly likable and endearing. His faint heart was never going to win fair lady but the manner in which he tried to transform himself into the courageous and fashionable suitor was most entertaining. The actor's well maintained accent, emphasis on key words and use of gesture made his delivery of lines particularly clear and drew complete attention.

Dave Goodall as Sir Lucius O'Trigger

This was a very strong cameo performance by a very good actor. The accent and characterisation created a real person rather than a caricature. Good use of voice, posture, gesture and interplay with other characters were the hallmarks of the performance. When he was on the stage he somehow possessed it, particularly in the dueling scene.

Henry Payne as Fag

This actor has quite a quiet voice and did not seem to have complete confidence in himself. His lines were a little hesitant. In order to grow as a performer he needs to slow down his delivery and really enunciate each word. He should also try to avoid shuffling his feet by planting himself firmly in position and maintaining that posture. With attention to these aspects of the craft he will find he develops as an actor and will look and feel more confident. With youth behind him he has places to go.

Tim Glen as David

This actor has difficulty in remembering lines but maintained a good accent and provided some comic moments.

Philip Wells as the Coachman

This is one of the few occasions when I am prepared to concede that a director was right to take a role in the play, Philip maintained a good accent, spoke clearly and in character and produced a pleasing cameo.

Teresa Ravenscroft as Mrs Malaprop

This is THE character everyone remembers in the play and has high expectations of. This actress did not disappoint. She was funny in her overbearing attempts to control Lydia's life. She produced dramatic changes of mood rather than playing the role constantly at one level. Her delivery of her mistaken utterances were well timed allowing the audience to take in, what she meant to have said, what she had said and why the consequences were funny. She very cleverly spoke to Lucy as though she was either a simpleton or an infant which we knew was far from true. Her affected airs and wonderful "fluffiness" made her a joy to watch. Use of voice, facial expression, body posture and gestures made this a well rounded characterisation.

Lizzie Fenner as Lydia Languish

This actress used a nicely affected manner of speech which helped her characterisation so that she came over as shallow, spoilt, self-centered and whining as well as unrealistically romantic. She was earnest and used lots of gesture to mark points. Her delivery was quite fast a lot of the time but the clarity with which she spoke saved her from swallowing lines. This was a mature performance from a young and relatively inexperienced actress. Lizzie's performance skills are well beyond school drama level.

Sofia Harrington as Julia

This actress played the more mature and sensible of the two girls. Her delivery of lines was very clear with good stress on key word to bring out the meaning of the English language as it was spoken in the eighteenth century. Her righteous indignation with Faulkland towards the end of the play was well played. She was so practical and pretty it was very hard to see what attracted her to him apart from a highly developed sense of duty. This was a mature performance which belied the actress's age and puts her firmly in the realms of adult drama, where she could hold her own against much more experienced actresses.

Cathy Stuckey as Lucy the Maid

This actress played this conniving and avaricious servant well. Her shameless swindling of her mistress and the various suitors was a good mix of mischievousness and outright amorality. The difficulty of being on stage with only the audience to talk to, led to some drifting and it would have been better if her moves had been more purposeful.

Scarlett Wells as Urchin and Servant

This young lady had a nice clear little speaking voice and I hope she continues to grow in adult drama.

All in all the quality of acting in this production was good, and the pace and well timed humour kept the audience alert despite the fact that this is a long and rather alien play today.

Thank you for your hospitality

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