

Ravenscroft

by Don Nigro

D & M Productions, Ilminster

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The Play

Falling somewhere between murder mystery, Gothic thriller and dark comedy with near farcical elements, Ravenscroft is not easy an easy play to define. The drama takes place in a remote English country house in the winter of 1905, and largely consists of a complicated web of reported events, as the various female characters of the household concoct their individual stories which confuse the increasingly frustrated Inspector Ruffing on his quest to arrive at 'the truth' of who was responsible for the murder which took place before the opening of the play. There are a number of demands/challenges for the actors and director, particularly in the style of dialogue and use of language, which doesn't quite ring true for the period. This could be down to the playwright being an American, who may have chosen an English country house in the Edwardian era to provide a suitably spooky setting for his play. There is little action in the first half of the play in particular, which is very wordy and doesn't really seem to go anywhere apart from round and round in circles, confusing detective and audience alike. However, there are some lovely comic lines and repartee, almost reaching the point of farce in places, especially in Act 2, when the action hots up a bit. The actors are onstage throughout, which demands high energy levels and necessitates remaining in character from start to finish.

The Production

The set (Dave Goodall & Brian Perkins) calls for simplicity, with specified pieces of period furniture arranged to furnish the library, where the action takes place, and chairs to seat the actors out of the light when they are not actually 'in the room'. This was achieved admirably, the curved line of period chairs upstage appearing most effectively, with the beautifully pink upholstery set against the black screens and contrasting beautifully. The library/playing area was cleverly and simply depicted by a large rectangular Turkish rug, the acting area being defined within a semi-circle. The impressively stylish burgundy leather armchair was evocative of the period, with a nice touch of a couple of old books and stuffed parrot on the low table beside it. The imposing stand with the white vase sitting atop featured prominently centre stage, and one might have wondered why, but of course this became apparent later on.

This play did not make heavy demands on lighting and sound (Brian Perkins), but these were crucial in setting the mood of the play, particularly at the beginning, and were carefully managed. Like the set, the lighting also calls for simplicity. When one entered the theatre the empty chairs were lit very effectively in soft light, which switched to the main acting area as the play began. The actors moved into the light as they entered the library to be

interviewed by the inspector, and out of the light, but not out of sight when they left the room, returning to their respective chairs. The opening music (The Maravele Clock Music & Tempus Fugit) morphing into the clock ticking was well chosen and very effective in evoking the somewhat spooky atmosphere of the play.

Costumes were very impressive, colourful and appropriate to each character. I particularly liked the simplicity of Marcy's guise as governess in her cool cream skirt and white blouse compared with the more lavish appearance of Mrs Ravenscroft, as lady of the house, and striking outfit of Mrs French, whose costume appeared to lend her height, augmenting her imposing persona. Hair (Rachel Glynn) was striking, nicely in keeping with the period, with styling and colour to suit each individual character. Make-up was suitably undiscernible, apart, quite rightly, from that of Mrs. Ravenscroft. Props were appropriate and well used, although perhaps there was a little too much fiddling around with the decanter stoppers. In particular, the wine colour was quite believable, and the vase – a moulded plaster tour-de-force - smashed beautifully on cue!

Direction

This could not have been an easy play to direct, the first half, in particular being fairly static and reliant on the actors' skill in holding the attention of the audience by introducing plenty of light and shade, making one want to listen and try to puzzle out the various permutations of the story as it unfolded. There was good pace and variation in tempo, the dialogue occasionally becoming a little too fast in places, so that some potentially comic lines were lost. Cues were for the most part picked up well. Grouping and movement were unobtrusive, which is what one wants, and there was plenty of tension building towards the climaxes at the end of the first act and over the wonderful vase-smashing moment in Act 2. The original stage directions called for the women to move in and out of the light, according to whether they were 'on-set' in the library, or out of the room upstage. This was perfectly achieved, and the transitions between scenes remained fluid without interruption. There were just a few occasions when a character briefly left the stage (presumably to avoid a difficult cross-over with another character moving into the light), returning to take her seat upstage as unobtrusively as possible. The invisible window downstage left was, for the most part convincing, although there was no real sense of the bleak cold and snow outside. Having a '4th wall' is not an easy effect to produce, and needs careful management so that its imagined position remains consistent. The decision to cut the final section of dialogue between Marcy and Ruffing was probably a wise one, as it might have been regarded as an unnecessary, possibly even distasteful add-on, although it made the ending a little abrupt. I liked the way each character returned to their seat at the end of the play, and the way they were lit briefly at the back. Perhaps the light could have lingered on them fractionally longer before going down and coming back up for the curtain call.

Acting

Inspector Ruffing – Dave Goodall

My goodness, you had put in a vast amount of work, both on the production side and taking on the major role of the inspector. Ruffing was played with a nice sense of irony and wry humour, and you managed to sustain the role wonderfully, moving from a position of control to gradually increasing frustration, puzzlement and anger at the way the five women seemed to be manipulating the truth. The very occasional prompts were given and taken so well that they were barely noticeable, and you managed to disguise any momentary lapse of memory by continuing to peruse what you had written in the ever-present notebook. The gradual slide into drunkenness in the second act was well managed, without going too over the top, although it might have been equally believable without quite so much continual sipping from the glass. The role demanded a continuous drip-feed of energy, which you gave it well and truly – the only momentary ‘break’ being when you were smashed over the head with the vase. A lovely, thoughtful performance.

Miss Marcy Kleiner - Kayleigh Storey

A somewhat steely character, for the most part concealing her vulnerability beneath a prickly exterior. The simple costume and pinned back hair of the governess were perfect for the character of Marcy. To begin with, she seems stand-offish and defensive in the face of the inspector’s questioning, but as she gets to know him a little and sees that he has suffered his own sadnesses in life, she thaws out a little and is more willing to give him the occasional snippets of truth. She rarely lets her guard down however, apart from when she speaks of the daughter she was forced to leave behind. I wonder if you could have allowed her to soften just a little more when the tears begin to fall, even though she tries to hide them. A polished, self-assured performance.

Mrs Ravenscroft - Maggy Goodall

A flirtatious, manipulative woman, but not without a good deal of charm. Your costume and hair were wonderfully colourful, and you had obviously worked hard on the part. Lines were delivered with great confidence, and cues picked up very efficiently. Occasionally your diction and speed of utterance interfered with the effective delivery of the lines however, and a few lovely funny sentences were lost. While keeping up the pace and picking up cues is essential, I think that you can afford to slow down generally a fraction, so that each line is being spoken as if for the first time. That said, you brought warmth and charm to the character, her angry outburst at the end of Act 1 coming as quite a surprise. A confident performance.

Miss Dolly Bemis - Paula Denning

Poor Dolly, she has such a hard life and has to endure continual put-downs from everybody, putting up with both verbal and physical abuse. A simple, endearing character, with some wonderful one-liners, you played the character with perfect precision and seriousness, a good sense of comic timing, and you didn't fall into the trap of going over the top. The hurried exit to vomit in the aspidistra earned a thoroughly deserved round of applause from the audience. Well done, a smashing performance.

Mrs Ellen French - Irene Glynn

A formidable character, made all the more so by that magnificent costume and hair. You brought a lovely mixture of respectful acquiescence and barely controlled anger to the part – we certainly wouldn't have wanted to get on the wrong side of her rolling pin! Your lines were well delivered throughout, with a good sense of timing. A wonderfully authoritative, if sinister performance.

Miss Gillian Ravenscroft - Iona Davis

An enigmatic young lady, with bags of energy, creativity and confidence on the outside. Inside – who knows? She is definitely a little strange, and appears to live in something of a fantasy world, quite possibly as a result of her parents' dysfunctional lifestyle. You certainly brought plenty of life and energy to the part, perhaps delivering your lines a little too fast occasionally, but producing and maintaining an infinitely watchable performance – almost an Alice in Wonderland character. Well played.

Summary

This was not an easy play to perform, as the plot-line of who had actually done the murder went round and round in circles without really going anywhere, and the script was very wordy. However, the piece looked wonderful in terms of design, set, costume, etc., and the actors remained focused and in character throughout and kept up the energy levels. A somewhat perplexing piece, you succeeded in producing an enjoyable – if exhausting – evening of theatre. Thank you for inviting me – being a newcomer to the area, it was only my second visit to The Warehouse Theatre, and a real pleasure to attend. What a treasure of a place! If I have failed to credit anyone, or got any details horribly wrong, do feel free to get in touch.

Liz Holliss