

I.E.S.

May 10th

I HATE HAMLET

by PAUL RUDNICK

An interesting choice of play that apparently has never been performed in the UK and I must admit when I read it I was not particularly impressed with the writing, especially of Act 1, and I thought the plot was rather thin but I did enjoy the play in the end and it was good fun entertainment for a wet Friday night. A fairly simple idea based on the premise of the ghost of John Barrymore appearing to assist a potential Hamlet I was concerned that there might be a temptation to 'ham it up' and play to the audience as the script gave ample opportunity for doing either or both but this production was restrained by both director and players and avoided this trap that even the writer seemed to encourage in his preamble to the text with use of words such as exuberance and gusto – so well done IES.

PRESENTATION

The set was a challenge to build with rooms off and a flight of stairs that had to be sturdy but it was well structured and solid and must have given the actors a real sense of security to move about in during this quite active play so very well done Dave, Maggy and Brian. In terms of set design the overall impression of gothic splendour was good but I felt that the set was over-cluttered for the opening which is described in the text as having 'sparse and modern furnishings – functional at best'. The dustsheets were obviously covering furniture to be seen later and it may be that it was not feasible to get some of the bigger pieces in during the interval as the couch that was 'slashed' was clearly the chaise long used in the second act when the apartment has been restored to the 'Barrymore' glory days; nevertheless the transformation that the curtains opened to reveal after the interval did get spontaneous applause from the audience – good for you Chris and Adrian you must have been pleased - so I may be being a bit picky. I did feel the atmosphere was conducive to feeling a little spooked which was the aim and this was definitely helped by the lighting and sound. I very much appreciated the difference in the lighting between the beginning of act 1 and the beginning of act 2. The bleakness of the un-lived-in apartment contrasted really well with the warmth of the gothic splendour of the second act and the seance scene in act 1 was well lit to give the eerie atmosphere. My only real criticism is that I did not see the shadow of

Barrymore that Andrew is meant to see during the séance at the moment of the thunderclap. The sound was very good – thank you to Jim for a great effect during the séance scene. Props were good – nice swords for the fight scene which was well done and felt ‘natural’ Barrymore did this very well with Andrew looking a little awkward so they must have been well trained by Stuart so congratulations to him. I very much liked the portrait above the fire in Act 2 and the medieval effect with the sconces was good and the general efficiency of the props was pleasing – champagne bottles are always a risk! Very well done to Gordon and Flame for their contribution. Everyone was well dressed for their roles and Louise and Maddie had done a very good job of replicating Barrymore’s appearance from that famous photograph, although I did feel that Patrick had more of a look of Olivier’s Richard III than Barrymore’s Hamlet probably because John Barrymore was a bigger built man, and I appreciated the visual effect of Barrymore and Andrew both dressed as Hamlet. I really liked the ‘Ophelia’ look of Deidre in Act 2. I felt that Gary was suitably extrovert in appearance and contrasted well with Lillian’s simplicity and Felicia’s boldness. Hair and Make –up was generally very good thanks to Vivienne but maybe Barrymore could have looked a bit more dramatic about the eyes. Overall presentation was really good and everything worked together to set the right atmosphere and effect for this play. Paul Smethurst as producer deserves a pat on the back for keeping all his ducks in a very organised row.

PRODUCTION

I thought the strength of the production was the confident use of the acting area. The performers did not have issues with the staging area and moved about it with certainty and some panache. It was also clear that they had built up a team ethic and worked very well together and that they could rely on each other. This has to be a credit to the director for allowing the team to have the freedom to bring about this coherence. There was generally good use of the space on the set and there was no crowding or masking. However I thought the séance scene was a little cramped and we did not get the view of Felicia that we should have had – perhaps she should have faced the audience full on as we needed to be able to see more of her very mobile face. I thought that the pace was good – the writing made the play slow to get going not the action or the performance but once the script picked up after the storyline had been set up the energy of the performers came up to a good level and maintained it throughout. Mostly the movement was natural although the setting up of the séance was a bit laboured – I think it was because of the long couch under the dust sheet which took up so much room in that particular instance. Once the point of the play was made and Barrymore’s ghost appeared it was much easier to maintain the pace

and the comedy rolled along and I was not aware of any nuance of the script being missed. As I said it was a one idea play so it was not a difficult one to follow by the audience but nevertheless the performers put a lot of energy into it and the audience responded to their efforts with obvious enjoyment. I think that the characters were all true to the script and the actors had been well directed and positioned throughout the piece so well done Anna on giving both actors and audience a good time. Just a small point, in the programme the actors were said to be listed in order of appearance and they did not make their first entrances in that order at all but followed the script. This is just a small point but it could have confused the audience.

ACTING

Patrick Knox – Ghost of John Barrymore

A talented actor who is to be commended for not overacting in this very tempting role – possibly occasionally you were not sufficiently grandiose and could have used bigger gestures. I think perhaps you did not put across the overdone-ness (probably not a word) of Barrymore. You built up a very speedy rapport with your audience and your relationship with Andrew developed in a very realistic way. I was in the back row and heard every word and every nuance and you had the audience engaged throughout the piece. The fight scene was very good and the hint of steel that came through was just a little bit scary – well done. I particularly enjoyed the dance with Lillian – you both really put across the gentle joy of old loves revisiting a good place – nicely portrayed. You have obviously got an instinctive feel for comic timing and I don't think you threw any lines away. A good performance.

Adam Smith - Andrew Rally

A difficult part to do with all the relationships focussed on Andrew and you put across the dilemma of the actor caught between money and status – very convincing when you were choosing money! You and Patrick really worked well together and just as well because the play hung on this relationship. I admired the way you quickly built all your relationships – the girlfriend, the agent, the estate agent, the impresario and maintained the balance during all the scenes. I thought particularly with Deidre you give an insightful performance of a frustrated young man on the horns of a dilemma between what you wanted and what she wanted in terms of ambition, desire and reality – difficult to achieve. When I read the play I thought this could be very 2D but you avoided the pitfalls and produced a interesting performance. Again can I commend you on the fight scene – a good piece between you and Patrick .

Gary Lefkowitz – Rob Stephens

Not a big role but Rob played Gary with such *joie de vivre* it was a joy to watch. It would be all too easy to play the fool in the part but Rob avoided this pitfall and produced a convincing character and the interchange about the hand puppet between Gary and Andrew was a great moment. I thought the accent failed a couple of times but it is a difficult ask and most of the cast dropped the ball occasionally on the American twang. Rob gave the impression that Gary was a smart cookie and a rough diamond and I think this is what the author intended. A nice performance.

Felicia Dantine – Jo Neagle

Apart from the seance scene this is not a great role but Jo put a good spin on it and Felicia almost became real – this is not a criticism of the acting but of the writing - the author seemed to me to be only really bothered about Andrew and Barrymore and gave little help to the rest of the characters using almost stereotypes to bulk out his one idea. A good accent with a snappy approach, Jo gave Felicia a presence and the seance scene was one of the best moments of the play. An intelligent performance.

Deidre McDavey - Silvey Webber

This character was such a stereotype that I thought it might be irritating but Silvey put a stop to that idea as soon as she entered. She made Deidre likeable instead of irritatingly twee and I could believe that super successful Andrew had kept this relationship going since acting school when in reality he would probably find a star name to go out with to further his career. Some good moments starting with her entrance 'Am I here?' in a breathless daze to her very sensuous last scene, The relationship between Andrew and Deidre could have been superficial but they made it work and I thought the scene where she and Felicia discuss sex with Barrymore stroking her hair and Deidre being unaware was really well done. Silvey is someone to look out for in a weightier role.

Lillian Troy – Margaret Ballard

Contrary to the rest of the cast Margaret had to maintain a slight German accent. One of the most difficult accents to do – except in 'Hello Hello' – but Margaret nailed it and her restrained whimsical attitude was a really good piece of acting. A very small part Margaret made the best of it and her scene with Barrymore in Act 2 was really convincing and moving and the finding of the hairpin was a good moment. I liked her relationship with Andrew and the way she showed that she was really rather aloof from these voluble show people. A nice performance.

CONCLUSION

A very enjoyable evening with some real highlights and it was obvious that the team both cast and production members had put their hearts into this show. It is always a pleasure to come to IES and I thank them all for their warm welcome and hospitality.

Polly English