

Double Death
By Simon Williams
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The Play

Double Death can hardly be described as a who-dunit, after all there is no attempt to dupe the audience. They know from the start that the Hennessy twins, Max and Ashley, are out to kill each other. The suspense in the play, and there is plenty of suspense, is about waiting to see which brother will win and how it will be achieved.

The play contains twists throughout and is a twist itself on the old, possibly tired theme of guess the murderer, as plays based on Agatha Christie etc. One such twist is the fact that although the play opens on a windy, stormy night in an old mansion in Cornwall, the mansion has been converted to take the now wheelchair-bound Ashley with the creation of a lift and the fitting of a modern communication device, which works through the telephone receiver and forms part of the clever plot with which Max hopes to murder Ashley but which is ultimately a reason for his downfall.

The reliance of such electrical gadgetry means that the play has to have a very good sound engineer on the one hand and a clever actor on the other. After all the conversations between the brothers in different rooms were actually an actor conversing with his own pre-recorded voice. The fact that this was carried out so well is a credit to director, sound engineer and actor. Anyone who has performed in a play which involves taped voices etc. will know of the opportunities for disaster which this arrangement offers. A huge pat on the back, consequently for getting it so right and for making it look so easy. I actually asked the director in the interval to confirm that the remote voice was actually recorded, wandering for a little while whether there actually were twins involved!

The fact that the play contains only five characters and really only four actors makes it necessarily a feat of learning for all involved but especially Chris Williamson who played both the twins and was thus on stage for almost the entire production. The casting was generally good with each character being believable and being fitted by the actor concerned although I did have a few concerns about Nurse Malahide being sufficient of a femme fatal to interest young Max, until, that is, we learned that she too was a twin who had been involved in the death of her sibling, which made her the perfect partner, psychologically, for Max.

A good rule of thumb in murder mysteries or thrillers is to listen to audience reaction during the interval and after the show. In this case the audience were really buzzing with the originality, cleverness and quality of the piece and its performance. To say the audience enjoyed the evening is an understatement!

Presentation

One of the most impressive things about this impressive production was that generally everything worked so well. The play opens in half light, we half see Max making the first use of the answer phone device and placing a cd in the player. The lights rise and we quickly see the first use of the lift. The arrows we know so well from hotels and department stores tell us the lift is coming. The lift doors open as lift doors should. The

interior of the lift is lit, as we would expect. Indeed everything operates as if real. This attention to detail was excellent and helps make a production fly.

I suppose that if I was to carp at all about the presentation it would be that the room itself didn't particularly make one thing of a great old Cornish mansion. It could have been any old house partly converted to make it habitable for a wheelchair occupant. That aside everything worked. The furniture was fairly plush but sturdy. The settee held its occupants firmly so that rising was easy. The stairs to the upper floor actually looked as if they went somewhere, which is certainly not always the case. I notice that Jennifer Hammond had loaned all the furniture so it might have actually resided in such a room in reality. The windows looked real but the glass looked sufficiently opaque to hide the identity of Max when Ashley was on the stage. Above all the phone worked so well that it was hard to rid oneself of the conviction that the sound was live when logic said it must be recorded.

Costume was effective throughout as it should have been with no need for specialist wear. Even the nurse was dressed as she might be for a private house and the only pandering to convention by D.I. Fergus was the ubiquitous detective's raincoat. Again, though, detail was good so that we could see the flour patch on Lalla's skirt in an early scene, proof that she had indeed been baking.

I always look for the feel a production has. Here the detail within the room gave a feel that this really could have been a room in Cornwall, even if the walls didn't particularly look as if they would have contained it. The set design and construction team of **John Attree, Brian Perkins, Chris Williamson, Dave Goodall and Brenda Lake** deserve credit for the overall look of the set and its sturdiness. Nothing moved and everything worked well – even the lift doors, which we knew were a sham really, opened with the satisfying swish which might have placed them in Debenhams or the Grand Hotel!

Production

Rachel Hunt was fortunate to have such a fine set of actors and backstage crew. She then brought out the best in her actors by an unfussy, clever style of direction which made the production easy to follow and always interesting. Effects were carried out easily by **Nicola Langhorn and** the stage crew, **Ellie and Joe Crabb**, carried out their work without us noticing. This cannot have always been easy as Max/Ashley had to involve himself in quick changes, rushes from lift to stage right or left etc. Lighting by **Brian Perkins** was well done. The play starts in near darkness yet we have to be able to witness a number of important pieces of action, significant in the plot. We were able to do so without ever losing the feeling that we were staring into a blackened room. Brian always carried out the difficult trick of bringing lights up full when characters touched the switch and dropping them to complete blackout when fuses were pulled.

Sound by **Jim Hawkrige** was simply excellent. So much of the plot revolved around sound in one way or another and anything less than spot on sound would have detracted badly from the success of the whole production. On the evening I saw the production I could not fault either the sound or the use made of it by actors. I really cannot think how the sound could have been improved, which I do not think I have ever written in an adjudication before!

Rachel Hunt's direction worked well. She grouped characters well and the wheelchair never got in the way of the action, which it could have done. With only four characters on stage Rachel had to group them at times yet not leave the stage looking unbalanced by having huge empty spaces. She succeeded in avoiding this mistake except perhaps once or twice towards the end of the play where desk, wheelchair and characters forced a little awkwardness as they became almost entwined.

I am sure Rachel was disappointed by the gun failing to fire at least twice. I would urge her to forget this and put it down to experience. Guns, like animals and children, should never be worked with if one can help it as they will inevitably fail to work given half a chance. The audience were so wrapped up in the action that I feel sure they substituted the sound of the gun in their minds. Indeed, the first time it failed to fire I was unsure as to whether this was part of the plot or a piece of bad luck. On the whole, Rachel, you can feel very pleased with the pace, action and feel of the whole production. Well done!

Performances

Max Hennessy/Ashley Hennessy

Chris Williamson gave a most assured and moving performance as the twins Max and Ashley. It must have been a real feat of endurance to have to rush around as Max, wheel effortlessly around the stage as Ashley, then race off and return as Max again. Chris has a clear voice, which was well used in the recorded sequences. Only clarity would have worked for them. He acted very sensitively as Max, as it would have been easy to go over the top with such a larger than life character. Ashley always seemed quieter and slightly ill at ease. This was a clever piece of characterisation by Chris. He certainly seemed to have got under the skins of the two brothers sufficiently that we saw two different young men, not only differentiated by the fact that one was in a wheelchair. Chris made both brothers very believable – unpleasant, especially Max, but believable. It may well be that the parts suited Chris well but he still made a lot of them. A very fine performance.

Lalla Kershaw

Felicity Forrester is obviously an experienced actress who made her part look easy, which I'm sure it was not. She played the part with a twinkle in her eye and a smile in her voice when talking to her reprobate nephews. We believed that here was a slightly bohemian lady, willing to overlook the excesses and evils of the boys, who were, after all, just high spirited to her view. It is only towards the end of the piece that she starts to take seriously the situation. When she holds the gun and threatens to shoot Max we feel she is capable of doing it, as if Max has let down the rules she lives by. This was another fine performance by an actress I had not seen previously but look forward to seeing in future productions.

D.I. Fergus

It is always possible to fall into the trap of making the local police inspector into a joke character, which would have been unworthy of this upright supporter of law and order. **Richard Walters** avoided such dangers by playing Fergus as local and broad of accent, yet sensitive and serious throughout. I especially liked his delivery when talking of his

ex-wife, another twin of course. He was able to make the audience laugh without ever becoming a joke himself. Richard is obviously experienced enough in the theatre to have ignored the misfiring gun, continuing as if it had fired loudly. There was a firm, reliable quality to Fergus which Richard kept going throughout. A convincing performance which I enjoyed.

Nurse Malahide

Jane Leakey had the challenge of playing the only character who is not as they seem. We know the twins are evil, their aunt too gullible, Fergus honest and upright but the good nurse is actually as evil as Max, with whom she has planned Ashley's demise. A twin herself and responsible for her sister's death she is involved as conspirator and lover with Max. Jane played this very well and was entirely believable as the private nurse, with just the right amount of put down of Max when he was pretending to be Ashley and to embarrass her. It was only in the last scenes when the nurse was shown to be up to her neck in the plot to kill Ashley that Jane didn't look entirely comfortable. I'm not sure why this was but I found it hard to believe that Max would have fallen for this nurse. I suppose, as I have already opined that it is credible that her past would have made her naturally a magnet for Max but there was something here that didn't quite ring true. Having stated that Jane produced a good performance as the nurse, again articulating very clearly and able to convey a touch of humour into what she was saying. An interesting performance, Jane.

I was unsure exactly who represented the other twin at times when both had to be visible including Max's death on the stairs. I will lay money, however, that it was not Tim Williamson. Whoever it was did a good job, appearing briefly and indistinctly to prevent us seeing the fact that he bore only a slight resemblance to Chris Williamson. Well done, whoever you are. You carried out an essential part without ever getting a word wrong!

Conclusion

I must say that I approached the Warehouse with some trepidation on Wednesday night. Thrillers can be very difficult to do well. Get it wrong, even slightly, and they become funny rather than thrilling. I need not have worried though – this production was really well judged, nicely paced and quite disturbing enough in places to thrill the hardest of theatre goers. **Rachel Hunt** was well served by a good, strong cast in which **Chris Williamson** gave an especially good performance and the cast were well served by Rachel. I had a really enjoyable evening, even recognising all the Shakespeare references before the characters. Thank you Illminster Entertainments Society for a very enjoyable evening. My journey back to Minehead seemed to take no time as I thought through all I had seen.

Clive Wooldridge 29th June 2009