

BEDROOM FARCE

by Alan Ayckbourn

Ilminster Entertainments Society – Thursday 14th September 2017

THE PLAY

What a joy! I loved this script – it reminded me just how good Alan Ayckbourn was in his heyday, before he drifted off-line in my opinion, seemingly forever seeking new styles and dramatic structures, and his once-loyal audiences began to realise he was no longer dependable for a thoroughly enjoyable evening in the theatre.

Ayckbourn himself has said that he used to announce the name of his yearly Scarborough summer play well in advance, and then write feverishly right up to the deadline of the actors' first read-through, and that he had decided to write a 'bedroom play' because he'd already used kitchens (*Absurd Person Singular*), and living room, dining room and garden (*The Norman Conquests*). I imagine the words 'bedroom' and 'farce' just fell nicely together in his mind, but the play itself is a far cry from the traditional scantily-clad characters in increasingly unlikely, chaotic, and compromising situations which the title suggests. Indeed I'm not even sure that it *is* a farce, though it certainly has some farcical elements.

Does this matter? Well yes, I think so, because farce is usually peopled with two-dimensional characters with whom we have no need to engage emotionally, and demands a particular playing style, paced sufficiently fast so that the audience have no time to stop and think what nonsense it all is. In contrast, the great thing about Ayckbourn is that he makes you care about his characters and that their dilemmas have the ring of truth. You laugh with them, and yet you feel their pain. I would admit however that the fourth couple – Trevor and Susannah – are pushing this a bit! Their neurotic self-absorption is monumental, but it is of course this – and its consequences in the form of some of those rather contrived situations - which provides most of the farcical elements of the humour and drives the play through that desperately long night.

He says, incidentally, that the idea of having three separate bedrooms as the acting area came from seeing how big the stage at the new Lyttleton Theatre was going to be. Having been asked by Sir Peter Hall to write something for the opening of the theatre, he felt he needed a multiple location set to fill it!

Unfortunately, of course, few amateur companies have access to enormous stages, and indeed I find it difficult to imagine how IES are going to fit those three bedrooms in at the Warehouse... I very much look forward to seeing how it all works.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

When the tabs went back I was amazed to see how perfectly you had managed to fill the stage with those three interlocking bedrooms. It was a wonderful surprise! Why, then, did we as an audience not applaud? Maybe, like me, everyone was too preoccupied with admiring how cleverly it all fitted, but I do think a 'claque' would have got us all clapping and would have been well worthwhile – there's nothing like joining in with appreciative applause to settle us down and get us in the right mood. And the set constructors like it, since their work is so rarely acclaimed publicly!

Even without the programme to tell us, and the costumes to remind us, the bedrooms had a very strong sense of period – very much of the late 70s in both style and colour (even though the one in the middle had yet to make up its mind). But more impressive still was the way the décor and the furnishings told us about the people who lived there.

The bedroom SR was very clearly that of an older established couple and I really liked the way it led through an arch into an antechamber (I remember putting those sorts of arches in my first house at the end of the 60s, along with woodchip wallpaper!). Having the dressing table upstage near the

practical window, and the double bed on the SR wall made very good use of the space, and the chair just downstage of the bed was a nice idea and was well used by Ernest. I also noted that Ernest and Delia still favoured sheets and a cellular blanket – none of this modern duvet nonsense for them. There was nothing on the floor to delineate the extent of the bedroom (though it was all so real that I felt I could almost imagine a carpet) but of course each bedroom had, of necessity, to share a bit of floor-space with its neighbour.

The middle bedroom was clearly demarcated by the lining paper on which Malcolm and Kate had been experimenting with blobs of colour, and was appropriately bare of furniture (apart from the unmade bed of course, the stepladder, and one bedside cabinet for the phone). Because the bed was end-on to the audience we had a decent amount of space in front of it – occupied from the start by the flat-pack desk in its cardboard box. This was the only one of the three rooms with a practical door upstage and I loved the fact that this opened onto a landing, painted blue, set forward of the cyc wall and with a sloping ceiling – like eaves. Bravo!

The bedroom SL was completely different – stylish and a la mode; very much that of a young professional couple. Here the bed also jutted out onto the stage from the SL wall, with champagne coloured duvet cover and bed linen, silky grey wall-furnishings and scarlet accents in the phone and the flowers. Even the cover of the Len Deighton matched the colour scheme, and I really liked the stylised picture of the couple over the bed – done by Chris Ackerman, I noted. There was an open doorway leading off stage just up from the bed, and I was pleased to see that the backing flat had been painted to suit.

All in all, I thought this was an exceptionally well designed and beautifully realised set, and seeing it at the start gave me confidence that the production would be of the same very high standard.

Lighting was quite a challenge, given that Brian Perkins had to light each area independently, with a minimum amount of spill. The wall lights (well-chosen) were a help, but had of course to have support from the rig, and in the case of the SR bedroom the bedside lights were on and off independently. Nightmare! In addition there was a requirement for a night-time effect (very nicely done) as well as light in the offstage areas. I think the SR and SL bedrooms were a great success but inevitably the middle bedroom was a bit of a muddle from a lighting point of view, and actors tended to move in and out of patchy shadow if they were very much downstage of the bed. I thought the lighting plot itself was a difficult job done very well, and the cueing was absolutely spot-on – congratulations.

Sound (Mike Morgan) was a lot less demanding. In fact I would think most of what we heard offstage might have been done live (lots of doorbells as well as Malcolm's hammering outside on the landing) though of course the ringing phones will have been recorded. I did wonder whether we might have heard some recorded evidence of the party downstairs when we were in Malcolm and Kate's bedroom, ideally with augmentation when their door was opened. It is a very nice effect when done accurately, but maybe you felt this was fussy, or just too complicated.

Lots of props of course and all of them entirely 'right'. I don't know what Ernest and Delia were eating on their toast – presumably not really pilchards – but they certainly seemed to be enjoying it. I was going to say that none of the props were particularly challenging for Jacqueline Wanstall, but then I remembered that amazing desk/dressing table (or whatever it was) that Malcolm put together – to get its top sloping perceptibly was impressive, and then to have it falling apart so spectacularly was nothing short of genius!

Costumes too were very good, and nicely in period as far as I could tell, thanks to some excellent sourcing by Nicola Griggs and Kate White. I would think Chris (as Trevor) was wearing genuine period flares, though Mick (as Malcolm) had to make do with inserts. Even Nick's striped pyjamas were ageless, and Ernest looked suitably over-dressed in evening wear and then in pyjamas and dressing gown. No slippers though? All four girls were dressed entirely appropriately for character - nice. Great that you managed to find an extra-large leather coat for Trevor to go home in too.

Hair and Make-up were well handled and seemed natural. It was good to see Delia's hair up for dinner and taken down when she was getting ready for bed and I liked Susannah's hair braided and knotted behind – a style I seem to remember from the period. Shades of Bo Derrick? I was also pleased to see Dave's hair cut – suited the character extremely well - and I was interested to watch Maggy removing her character's make up, as scripted, without removing her own – clever! The only other comment I have about make-up is that I think I would have got Kayleigh to use cover-up on her ankle tattoos. They don't look at all out of place nowadays but I think would have been exceptionally rare in the 70s.

Direction

It was clear throughout that this production was in safe and very experienced hands. I noted that Eric Beckley had directed the play before, back when it was first released for amateur performance, and was pleased to read in the programme that he found it most enjoyable to revisit nearly 40 years later. The idea has never very much appealed to me, but I know of several directors who do often go back to past productions and achieve renewed success with a different cast.

There is a well-known dictum which says that 90% of directing is in the casting. I don't actually subscribe to this idea myself, at least not in the world of amateur theatre, having seen quite a number of apparent 'dream teams' come to grief – mainly because the director failed to get them to work as a team. However, being able to cast two pairs of married couples as ... well, married couples, must have been a godsend, especially when they are as good at acting as the Goodalls and the Glynns. And additionally there is a sort of comforting patina you get with long-established real-life partners which isn't usually present in on-stage couples. In this play that easy familiarity wasn't as obvious in the other two pairs, but of course that worked rather well in the context of the play since it seemed unlikely that either relationship was very well-established, nor destined to survive a great deal longer!

The play began very well with Ernest and Delia bickering gently – a vintage Ayckbourn domestic scene – but, worryingly, Maggy was under-projecting. I could still hear what she was saying but to my ears there was a significant imbalance between herself and Dave in terms of volume, and it seemed that she hadn't made allowance for being well upstage and sitting in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile at her dressing table. This wasn't a problem when she came further downstage, and I thought it could, and should, have been rectified in rehearsal. It was a tiny point, and I mention it only because I honestly think it was one of only two miss-steps in a production which was well-nigh flawless in terms of direction!

The other? Well, it was much later in the play, when Trevor has phoned Kate and Malcolm from Nick and Jan's place. The script doesn't specify which phone he was using, but you clearly decided to put him on the off-stage extension, which was fine, except that the backing flat seen through the doorway wasn't lit and so his voice came out of the darkness, which seemed odd to me. In fact I even made a mental note that perhaps we could have heard his voice as though coming tinnily from Kate's receiver. However in all the other, subsequent, phone conversations, as far as I remember, we saw both participants, so you wouldn't want to establish a different convention. In this case of course we didn't need to actually see Trevor, but in my opinion we needed to be able to place him and visualise him.

And the flawless stuff? Well, lots of really effective direction goes unnoticed by the vast majority of the audience, because it is only when the pace drags, or the flow seems uneven, or audibility is poor that we sense something isn't working. But someone has to block scenes so as to make the most of the acting area available, while avoiding unnecessary masking. Someone has to think about creating pleasing stage pictures which underline the action and which, even if only subliminally, support the characterisations. Someone has to ensure that projection and performances are nicely balanced, and delivered with the same sort of energy, while ensuring that pace varies refreshingly. And someone has to generate the right mood, so as to chime sympathetically with the author's perceived intentions.

Here the production was seamless, flowing from bedroom to bedroom with a really effective variety of pace while still maintaining energy, so that it all seemed so natural, and so pleasing. This took a

lot of skill, in my opinion. But what stood out for me was the physical comedy – Nick’s attempt to reach the book despite the spasm in his back for instance, and the inevitability of its slipping over the edge of the bed and his subsequently following it; so simple, so real, so funny - and such a lot of rehearsal, I would guess, to achieve this. The fight in the middle bedroom between Trevor and Susannah was another example; no holding back here it seemed, and yet it must have been so carefully choreographed so as to avoid injury – fabulous! Moreover, Kate and Malcom’s timing in pulling them apart was superb. And Jan’s getting Nick off the floor, collapsing on the bed underneath him and yet still being fully visible to the audience and able to continue the scene, finally escaping and then shoving him like a torpedo up the bed. It was priceless... Such good work.

Acting

I note that you have put Maddie Lowe in the programme as being responsible for continuity, but not for one moment, on this the 3rd night of the run, did I think anyone was going to dry. The whole cast of 8 seemed so well rehearsed, and so absolutely in the moment, that it was easy to forget that they were actors playing roles... This is rare in my experience.

Ernest and Delia – Dave and Maggy Goodall

I loved the pernickety character you created here, Dave. I can’t remember if we ever discovered what he did in life, but he felt to me like a retired bank manager. Nothing special about him, but so very real and rather charming in the way he stumped about ineffectually. Your delivery was impeccable and the characterisation utterly credible. Delia of course was the mainstay of their marriage, though I’m quite sure neither of them would acknowledge this, and I thought you, Maggy, as Delia, seemed wonderfully calm, and competent and completely at home in the role. Neither of you had any particularly funny lines, though I remember a nice laugh on Delia’s “We’re regulars. We go there every year” and Ernest’s “For your information there is steam rising off my top blanket in there”, and yet I sensed that you both kept us all constantly amused, making the most of Ayckbourn’s wonderful ear for dialogue without ever pushing too hard. He has said in the past that it is crucial that his characters aren’t played by actors who “like to wave from the train” and I’m pleased to say that I detected no hint of over-playing in these two lovely performances. Very good work.

Jan and Nick – Kayleigh Partt and Stephen Todd

Kayleigh, I saw you as Florence in *The Odd Couple* at the end of May, a performance which I enjoyed a lot, and which must have been great fun to play. How lovely though to step out of that role and almost immediately into this – much closer to reality and requiring much more subtlety. I thought you made a really good job of playing Jan, clearly fond of husband Nick but not entirely committed to the marriage – though goodness knows what she still saw in the monstrously selfish Trevor! The broad physical comedy with Nick was cleverly done, but additionally I felt we recognised that her relationship with each man was very sensitively indicated. The sexual tension we became increasingly conscious of upstairs at Kate and Malcom’s, and which led to that very convincing kiss, continued after Trevor had come round to Jan and Nick’s, but this time was hardly more than a physical awareness – enough though for Nick to bristle. Stephen – your performance in this role was extremely impressive, especially given that you are a relative newcomer to the stage. You coped with the physical demands well and amusingly, though I did wonder if you yourself had ever had an acute lumbago? The spasm can be so severe that you cannot bear even the *idea* of someone moving you! I thought you handled the wordless lazzo with the book superbly, because you seemed able to show us what you were thinking, without scribbling it on your face, and as a result it was deliciously funny. Similarly I felt we understood his gnawing concern about Jan’s residual interest in Trevor, though surprisingly we lost this a bit when Jan (and then Trevor himself) comes back to confess to the kiss. The words he is given suggest ready acceptance but I expected to see a bit more angst in the subtext. Nicely done though, from both of you.

Malcolm and Kate – Mick and Irene Glynn

There's no doubt that you two had most of the overt fun in this play and you sparked off each other beautifully. Presumably quite a bit older in real life than Ayckbourn had envisaged, but playing this couple as so much younger than Ernest and Delia gave perfectly good contrast. I began to see them as second-time-arounders because obviously there were no children remaining at home, and yet they were renovating a house together and still newly-wed enough to be playing silly games. Anyway it worked for me and I loved the lively performances you both gave. Excellent pace between you, and very good physicality, as well as excellent reactions. Tremendously enjoyable – bravo!

Trevor and Susannah – Chris Williamson and Silvey Rose Webber

Much the most difficult couple to play credibly, because they are as close to farce characters as Ayckbourn gets, in my opinion. They drive the plot on, but since we never see their own bedroom we meet them only in other people's, and in order for this structure to work they have to be extraordinarily thick-skinned! I have to say I thought you were magnificent in these roles – both utterly self-absorbed, hopelessly neurotic, and very funny in a rather scary way. Chris – your scene with Kate was a superb example of talking without listening, and I loved the way you moved in on Nick with much the same intention, though he was a great deal less polite, or sympathetic. And Silvey – you managed to keep this poor girl relatively understated without losing any of her obsessive intensity, as evidenced by her CBT-inspired positive affirmation mantra; extraordinary! Very well done, both of you.

SUMMARY

This production was beautifully presented, directed with great skill and acted with fabulous commitment – not a weak link anywhere! This was amateur theatre at the top of its game and you gave us a joyful evening's entertainment, which it was an enormous pleasure to adjudicate.

Thank you so much for inviting me. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

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