

Dangerous Corner Adjudication
IES, Ilminster – Thurs 25 April 2019

THE PLAY

First staged in 1932, the play opens with a revolver shot and a scream. There follows a tangled web of intrigue, during which each character reveals their part in the convoluted narrative of who was responsible for the missing five hundred pounds and the mystery of Martin's death. As Freda remarks early on, "Life's got a lot of dangerous corners". Set in motion by a simple faux pas over a cigarette case, the play's central question is whether it is better to risk telling the truth about everything, or to let sleeping dogs lie and live a peaceful life of illusions. The setting is the drawing room of the Caplans' home, shortly after dinner, with a small party of guests. There is a detailed furniture, property and lighting plot as a guide for the production team. While this is of course open to interpretation, there should be the impression of an upper middle class, well-to-do household in the 1930s. There are sound effects of revolver shots, doorbell and a wireless announcer. Characters all appear in evening dress, and there are helpful hints in the script as to individual characterisation and type. There is little action, and a lot of dialogue, which will be demanding on the actors in terms of keeping up the pace. As each character reveals their part in the developing story, the plot becomes more and more convoluted, so it would be easy for the audience to get lost from a momentary lack of concentration. The characters are mostly on stage throughout, so must be able to hold the audience's attention. Themes of homosexuality, adultery and drugs will have been controversial when the play was originally staged, and while much less so now, there is plenty to keep us puzzled about what really happened to Martin, who was responsible for taking what would have been then a large sum of money, and ultimately whether any character is deserving of our sympathy.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

With a full house on a Thursday night, the tabs opened to an original musical rendition of 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' (nicely reminiscent of the 1930s) and a stage in darkness, followed by effects of a revolver shot and a woman's scream, which were perhaps just fractionally too muffled. As the lights came up we were treated to a lovely opening tableau of the four women perfectly positioned around the stage in their evening finery. The set design was creatively implemented to invoke an art deco -style drawing room, with furniture carefully chosen and placed, avoiding the temptation to

clutter it with every item specified in the furniture & property plot. The rust-coloured curtains across the bay window up centre were echoed in the colour of the armchairs either side of centre, offset by the vivid blue-green vase of peacock feathers as a focal point in front of the window, and the more muted colour of the cushioned window-seat. Walls were painted a lovely shade of pale smoky blue-grey, broken up by carefully placed pictures, a substantial corner bookcase and simple marble fireplace stage left. The floor consisted of tasteful parquet style effect, with large black and white tiling effect on the upstage raised section and continuing out into the hallway, of which we had occasional glimpses when the double doors were opened. From where I was sitting, the section of hall we saw was beautifully implied, the pink and mauve/rust coloured walls contrasting tastefully with the blue-grey of the drawing room, and a splendid vase of flowers appearing on a round table just to the left of the door. The geometric patterns on the door and window frames were reflected in the marble fireplace/mantelpiece – another lovely touch showing just how much thought had gone into designing a set invoking a modern house of the 1930s.

Furniture, already mentioned in part, was in keeping with the set design, although the oil painting above the fireplace was perhaps a little too stark and modern looking. Presumably the photographic portrait on the back wall left of the double doors was that of “the old man”, Mr Whitehouse senior. The picture of flowers was unobtrusively placed above the grand piano, which was nicely adorned with family photographs etc. The wonderful old wireless set occupied a deservedly prominent place upstage right, as did the period telephone on the low table downstage left. As with the furniture, props were carefully sourced and mainly used to good effect. The musical cigarette box did the job, the colour of the whisky was believable, and ornaments were generally well selected and carefully placed. I especially liked the figurines either side of the mantelpiece with that intriguing glass sculpture (or was it a vase?) in the centre. Miss Mockridge’s cigarette holder was suitably imposing in the days when smoking was the done thing. Most other characters smoked from time to time, although this looked a little unreal, as there was no sense of smoke. This can be a problem on stage of course, but it might have been possible to have got hold of some realistic electronic cigarettes perhaps.

Lighting was used efficiently to evoke atmosphere of evening in the drawing room. There were various free-standing/table lamps whose timing was perfect when switched on. The art deco style wall lamps either side of the mantelpiece lent some extra brightness. The overall lighting gave a soft pinkish-gold feel of evening. Blackouts were well timed, followed by the lights being brought up slowly to reveal the tableaux of characters on stage. The actual light switches on the walls were nicely convincing. The sounds of the revolver shots were effective. The doorbell could perhaps have

been a fraction louder. The dance music in particular was well chosen and added to the atmosphere of the play.

Costumes were carefully thought out and appropriate for each character and the period. The men looked and moved convincingly in well-cut dinner jackets. The women in particular were beautifully clad in their glamorous evening dresses and sparkling jewellery. I loved the way that each character appeared in their own particular stunning colour, contrasting against the others. Miss Mockridge was modestly stylish in her black lace, Freda vivid in her peacock blue gown, Betty powder-grey and glittery, emphasizing her youth, and of course Olwen, in wonderful flowing crimson. Hair and make-up were similarly contrasting and applied with attention to detail and character, Betty and Olwen's soft waved hair set against the elegantly gathered styles of the other two. Make-up was suitable for the period, with lots of soft shiny red lipstick completing the glamour.

Direction

In your preamble to the play, you mentioned that this was your directorial debut at the Warehouse Theatre. This was by no means evident in any respect! That you clearly love the play was obvious in the attention to detail you gave it in every area of presentation and acting alike. A good deal of thought had gone into creating the set, and in particular the balance of colours, both in terms of set dressing and costumes. It is not an easy play to get right, largely because of the lack of any real action, most of which takes place in narrative form. There is a lot of dialogue, and it requires a good deal of skill to hold the attention of the audience so that they keep up with the story as it unravels, and don't lose the thread. Pace and good characterisation are essential elements to stop minds from wandering, and this you managed to produce in your actors. There also needs to be a balance between movement and stillness. Moves need to be natural, and made with a purpose, with no aimless shuffling or wandering. This was mostly achieved, with just the odd exception. Groupings were well managed, producing some lovely tableaux. In terms of pace, cues were mostly picked up well, after a slightly rocky start involving a couple of prompts. However the play felt generally safe and well-rehearsed, and went along at a cracking pace, the dialogue occasionally running a little too fast in places, I felt. The cut-glass accents of the time were well maintained, although occasionally interfered with the diction. I liked the choice of music, although wonder if it could have been used to maintain the atmosphere at the end of the first act. The audience had been warned that this was not an interval as such, but the couple of minutes' break here seemed a bit of an unnecessary vacuum. Overall, congratulations on a great directorial debut – hopefully you will make the choice to walk the other side of the boards more often!

The Acting

Freda Caplan – Ruth Moran

Freda is smart, efficient and in control of her emotions. As the story unfolds we learn of her unhappiness in marriage and her emotional turmoil over Martin. You perhaps appeared a little too careworn throughout, so that the occasional glimpses of humour and lightness, i.e. over the sandwiches, seemed a little forced. In keeping up the pace, which you achieved admirably, I felt you sometimes rushed your words rather, and some lines were lost when directed across or upstage. While picking up cues, you could probably afford to slow down the dialogue a little which would allow your thoughts to catch up with what you are saying and result in a little more light and shade in delivery. The emotional bits when Freda is grieving over Martin seemed a little contrived – again, you needed to allow yourself space to think about how your character was feeling at every moment. Overall a safe, confident performance.

Miss Mockridge – Maggy Goodall

You looked splendidly sophisticated in the black lace, and certainly regarded the various characters and goings-on with quiet amusement and the speculative eye of a writer. I wonder if you could have brought a bit more of a hint of the busybody and irony to the character. When she departs in the face of fraying tempers, there is a certain amount of relief expressed by Gordon and Betty at least – perhaps you were just a little too nice? The cigarette holder was a wonderful adjunct to the character, and could perhaps have been used a little more to suggest her quizzical attitude to “the snug little group” she surveys. A nice cameo performance.

Betty Whitehouse - Anna Griffiths

A petulant young woman, used to being indulged and getting her own way. Aware of her own prettiness, and prone to sulk or become hysterical, you brought plenty of energy and humour to the part. There is another side to Betty, which comes out as we learn of her unhappy marriage to Gordon, and makes her coquettish behaviour and affair with Stanton more understandable. You obviously enjoyed playing the part, and injected plenty of life into it without going over the top. The audience clearly loved that final flouncing exit. Well played.

Olwen Peel – Alison Maynard-Griffin

Olwen appeared vividly in that flowing silky crimson, which set her apart from the others both visually and emotionally. You brought a softness and warmth to the role as she observes the increasing tensions building around her. Your pacing and facial expressions were good, and you created a believable, sympathetic, somewhat enigmatic character. Perhaps you ran out of steam a bit by the third act, when you fell into the trap of rushing the dialogue a little too much, so that your account of the near rape and Martin's death didn't come across as strongly or shockingly as it might have done. You just needed to take little more time over those long speeches to allow your thoughts to catch up. Overall however, a lovely, very watchable performance.

Charles Stanton - Neil Morgan

A nicely measured performance, and a good example of keeping up the pace while allowing space for all the thoughts and nuances to come across. Stanton is not well liked by the others, and admits to doing wrong, but managed to inspire the sympathy of the audience at least. Good facial expressions and use of the eyebrows. You also managed to milk the humour, bringing a sense of sardonic irony and plenty of light and shade into the speeches without appearing contrived. A compelling performance.

Gordon Whitehouse - Benjamin Overd

Nicely camp, but not over the top, with good use of a cut-glass accent. You brought plenty of energy to the performance, while just occasionally rushing a little too much. You clearly enjoyed playing the part of Gordon, and even though he is a bit of a cad and gives Betty a hard time, there was a good dynamic going on between the two of you. We were left hoping that, with Martin out of the way, there might be the chance of a life together with Betty, allowing for certain differences and plenty of stormy moments. A strong, energetic performance.

Robert Caplan - Chris Williamson

Poor Robert has a hard time, as all the various revelations occur and his view of mankind and particularly those closest to him is sullied by his insistence on knowing the truth and not letting sleeping dogs lie. Basically a nice, solid sort of chap, we learn that he too has the occasional foible,

evident in his crush on Betty. When faced with the truth about his brother and the affair with his wife, it is hardly surprising that he loses his cool and his life falls apart. There was perhaps a little too much aimless wandering about at times, and your ranting at the loss of life's illusions began a bit too early so that it had nowhere to go. That said, this was a strong, authoritative performance.

SUMMARY

A lot of work and creativity had clearly been put into this production by everyone involved. While not the easiest of plays to get right in terms of holding the attention of the audience, you were patently successful on that score. Well done everyone!

Thank you so much for inviting me to come along and watch the play, and apologies if I have missed anyone out or got any details wrong.

Liz Holliss

26 April 2019

