

LADIES IN LAVENDER

by Shaun McKenna

IES – Thursday 5th July 2018

THE PLAY

I haven't seen this play before, and nor have I seen the film, so I come to the script fresh and without any preconceived ideas about it. I have really enjoyed reading and re-reading it. It is a charming story, which held me enthralled right to the end. I can see however that it presents considerable challenges for an amateur company...

For a start I wonder how you will manage to create four different acting areas on your Warehouse stage? The sisters' sitting room and the spare bedroom are likely to take up most of the main playing area, presumably both on the same level because you don't have much height to work with, but you also need to find room for the garden and, in particular, the beach. I suppose you might perhaps use that area front left of the auditorium which was used for the beehive in *Humble Boy*?

The period is very clearly late 30s – one or two references to that “little man with the moustache” - and this will give you practical problems in the set dressing, props and costume departments, and well as in terms of performance style – behaviours were so much more upright and proper in those pre-war days. Though the Widdingtons lived very modestly, and only allowed themselves biscuits with their cocoa at weekends, we are told, of course they still employed a cook!

I confess to being a little confused about the sisters' ages. In the film trailer I found on Youtube, which was released 14 years ago, both Judi Dench and Maggie Smith seem to be playing at about their own ages at the time – ie 70. This would chime quite well with their being ‘elderly spinsters’ by today's standards, and clearly the two characters consider themselves ‘old’; they mention it more than once. However I'm pretty sure the author of the original story on which the play is based had in mind that Janet was no more than 60 and that Ursula, being the younger sister, would still be in her 50s. At a time when average life expectancy was less than 70, they might well have considered themselves elderly. And after all Janet's Peter, whom she had lost in WWI only 23 years before, at most, couldn't surely have been already into his 40s? The point I am making here is that Ursula's infatuation with 20 year-old Andrea would be OK with a modern-day audience if there was a 30+ year age gap. However I reckon, if they thought about it, a 50 year age gap would be considered bizarre and perhaps a little too creepy!

The violin playing, whose remarkable quality is crucial to our enjoyment of the play I feel, will be quite difficult because inevitably it will have to be mimed, and this will need to be reasonably convincing. Lots of rehearsal required for this I should imagine!

And lastly, but by no means least, the balance of the play will need to be carefully managed by your director. Obviously our sympathies are supposed to be with Ursula; her broken heart provides the pathos I think we seek, but she has been extremely naïve in allowing herself to fall for this boy, and – frankly - rather manipulative in trying to hang onto him. In performance she will have to be careful not to alienate the audience, because I think it would be quite easy to side with Andre and Olga!

I shall be very interested to see how it plays out.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

I was amazed to see almost the entire width of the stage area used to create the four settings required! This was a bold but brilliant move by your set designer, Malcolm Young. I didn't realise that the ‘proscenium’ was removable at the Warehouse, but taking it out gave you a shallow but perfectly acceptable garden area down R and a beach area down L, with what appeared to be a path running across the front of the stage, hidden on the right by a ground row of flowers – mainly red geraniums, which looked as though they were real and

presumably therefore had to be taken out into the sunlight by day? Very nicely done, anyway. And having the laurel bush filling the extreme DR corner was a great idea. It seemed to be surviving – so far – and even put up with being clipped; lovely. My only quibble with the set building, which was of an extremely high standard overall, was with the half-glazed door leading into the house from the garden. I would have wanted some glass, or glass substitute, to fill those empty panels – though seen mainly side-on its absence was notable because there was no reflection as it opened. The sitting room, beautifully wall-papered and complete with a central sash window and a solid looking fireplace with mantle over, occupied much of the original stage area, but you had managed to make room for a spare bedroom on a 3' high rostrum stage L with an unseen staircase going up to this, and achieved a normal sized 'cottagey' bedroom door leading into the room, with another sash window no less – marvellous! You used the convention of wavy cut-away walls and I was pleased to see that you had given them a decent thickness and a neat filler – lots and lots of very good work here from your set-building team – Dave Goodall, Brian Perkins, Peter Schofield & Bob Hammond. The beach area made good use of the corner left over, but here the convention changed. Instead of theatrical realism, which was the watchword for the other three acting areas, the beach was indicated in a stylised way, with what appeared to be flat yellow sand-dunes. I wondered whether you might have got a scenery painter to suggest granite rocks on the two flats which delineated this sandy cove, to match that very nice faux-granite cube, which provided a handy seat.

Set dressing had been carefully chosen and was outstanding, I thought. The little table and folding metal chairs in the garden area looked appropriately in period, the two armchairs centre stage, on a nice sized carpet, were just right (though could just possibly have had antimacassars), the gateleg table against the wall, flanked by two hall/dining chairs – all spot-on. The old-fashioned radio was a triumph! I also very much liked the bedroom furniture, which fitted beautifully into that small room. Indeed I think you could have managed with a much narrower bed – 2'6" would have been perfectly adequate, and probably more in period than that 4 footer. And of course the windows both had lace curtains (in addition to practical ones), there was a lovely sampler on the bedroom wall, as well as a profusion of framed pictures, fresh flowers in the bedroom, dried flowers in the grate because it was summer, a nice pot plant upstage, etc etc – such fabulous attention to detail; well done, Malcolm!

Props (Lauren Turner, Anna Bowerman and Louise Adams) were also of a very high standard. I could see that a lot of effort had gone into getting them just right – the violin itself of course, in a nicely battered case, lending credence to the idea that it had belonged originally to Dr Mead's father, the period telephone, the radio with the lighted dial, the doctor's Gladstone bag, the cream-coloured tin for the cherry scones, what could well have been star-gazey pie (obviously very edible as far as Michal was concerned), those lovely glasses for the home-made wine, the salmon pink cardigan for the jumble sale, the old-fashioned armpit crutches... wonderful attention to detail. The portrait of Andrea was nicely done – I assumed in Photoshop, though I see that Chris Ackerman is credited with 'portraiture' so maybe he painted it? Just one possible slip up as far as I was concerned; although I believe it would have been available pre-war, it seems unlikely that a country doctor would have used commercially sliced white bread for his bloater paste sandwiches. Why not less contentious hand-cut 'door-steps' I wondered?

Lighting by Brian Perkins was very good indeed, I thought. Each acting area was accurately and effectively lit, with little or no spill – most impressive. And cues were all very tight. Once or twice I would have wanted a longer blackout, mainly to enjoy that glorious violin playing by Joshua Bell, but also a slower fade up to allow a gentler transition from scene to scene. It wasn't a long play, and I think a slightly more leisurely pace would have suited the mood. The lightning was behind the drawn curtains, which were yellow, so you could get away with those quick flashes, but the synchronisation between them and the sound seemed slightly off the night I came. And I did wonder whether you might have put in some support for the candle upstage – it seemed a very small light in the blackout, but it was of course relied upon as a source only very briefly. The gradual fade to that tableau formed by the two sisters, sitting hand in hand at the end, was beautifully done.

Sound was extremely well executed by Andrew Carson. I very much appreciated the music interludes, and in particular the skill you used in making it seem that the sounds from the violin were live. We knew they couldn't be of course because from where I was sitting, at least, the bow clearly had had its hairs removed and the strings had been slackened, presumably so that they wouldn't sound inadvertently. The only time when Andrea's violin playing really failed to convince was when he was standing down L at the end but the sound of the orchestra

was of course produced centre stage – more about this under Direction. The recordings of the shipping forecast and the radio announcer at the Wigmore Hall were both very realistic – well done. Janet’s dreadful piano playing off stage was well done. I thought it was great that you gave us the sound of the doctor’s car arriving, and that this was clearly an old period-style motor, and also a representation in sound of the magpie referred to by Dorcas; neither of these effects are specified in the script as far as I remember, and including them was a nice touch. Was there also a distant cry of gulls and the susurrations of the waves as part of the soundscape in the beach scenes? I don’t think I heard these, but no matter.

Costume was plentiful and none of it jarred as far as I was concerned, apart from Andrea’s ‘evening dress’ at the end, which I’m sure you know was wrong! I see that the Cast are credited with wardrobe and I reckon they did extremely well. Lots of changes for the Widdingtons and for Dorcas (who had at least two wrap-around aprons) and no modern styles, colours or patterns. Dr Mead was in a linen jacket and lightweight trousers throughout, as far as I remember and, once dressed, Andrea’s one suit worked well, though I felt that the contrasting lining to the cuffs of his brown shirt, when he rolled up his sleeves, looked quite modern. It was good that he wore a hat, when he came back from the dance, and when he went off to London. Olga also had three costumes I think and these were well chosen to emphasise her artistic side and to help her look youthful.

Make-up was imperceptible but hair was problematic. The men were fine, and Olga wore scarves around her own blonde bob which looked right, but I was surprised to see both Maggy as Janet and Ann as Dorcas in not terribly good wigs. You had gone to such a lot of trouble in all other aspects of presentation and I think it would have been well worth hiring real hair if you felt wigs were essential for these two characters. Actually it seemed to me that Irene as Ursula had found a very effective solution in that she had managed to colour her own hair a realistic grey and had added a matching hairpiece which she put up as a bun. I found it just about credible that she was in her mid-late 50s and from a period where hair dye was not pretty much the norm for those whose natural colour was going or gone.

I have gone on at some length in this section, I’m afraid, but I really thought presentation values for this production were exceptionally high – bravo to the whole team!

Direction

It was good to talk to you in the interval, Louise. I thought you and Malcolm had done an excellent job of getting this play so effectively from page to stage. It was a pleasure to watch and I very much admired the skill with which you delivered the production.

In my preamble I mentioned some of the challenges the play might require you to resolve. One I didn’t think of, and clearly should have, was the difficulty you might have in finding someone suitable to play Andrea. Not an easy role to cast – unless you happen to know a young man in his early 20s, good looking, preferably Polish, who has great stage presence and a lot of experience as an actor... Very wisely, it seems your choice of play was influenced by Michal’s being available and interested. What a find! I salute you, having done much the same thing myself, many years ago, in taking on *Of Mice and Men* for Frome Drama Club, mainly because I happened to see the perfect ‘Lenny’ playing in the Merlin pantomime that Christmas and persuaded him to audition!

Looking back at the other challenges I foresaw: well, I clearly needn’t have worried about your finding a way of fitting this complex set onto your stage – it was masterly! And though the bedroom and the garden room were, admittedly, a bit cramped when occupied by more than two people, this actually worked rather effectively in conveying the impression of a little cottage overlooking the sea. So often rooms depicted in contemporary plays are rather too big to be realistic, I find. The only area where I felt you struggled a bit, and had to compromise on theatrical realism, was the extreme foreshortening of the distance from the garden to the beach, because you had decided to join them with a tiny but practical section of the coastal path, and used this on two occasions that I remember – once when Olga hears Andrea playing and comes along the path to the edge of the garden to engage with Janet, and the other was when Dr Mead leaves the house via the garden and, approaching the beach area via that same path, sees and hears Andrea and Olga in conversation and leaves hurriedly, the way he came.

I reckon that it would have worked better in the audience's minds if there had been no physical continuity between the garden and the beach and that each had been reached from the other by coming down off the apron into the 'neutral territory' provided by the front of the auditorium and then up again via steps. Does this make sense to you? The other use to which the beach area was put was, as scripted, when Andrea appears in his tailcoat, playing apparently at the Wigmore Hall. Quite apart from the fact that he looked pretty scruffy, with modern trousers, no waistcoat and – unaccountably – a black bow tie, I felt that not having him in the same eye-line as the sisters distracted from that final tableau and considerably reduced the poignancy of the ending, for which you had worked so hard. Actually I think I would have ignored the author's stage direction at this point, and resisted showing us Andrea at all! If however you felt the play, and the audience, needed this resolution, I think I would have put him dead centre in front of the apron, at auditorium level, so as not to mask the sisters listening so raptly behind him. Admittedly he would have been extremely close to those who were sitting in the front row and his miming might have needed to be more accurate at this juncture.

As for the ages of the Widdington sisters, I got the impression that you had leaned towards the film-maker's interpretation, especially in Ursula's case. Her grey hair, pulled back into a bun, and her relatively unlined face, were uncannily reminiscent of Dame Judi's appearance in the trailer of the film version. I can hardly fault you for using such a wonderful performance as your inspiration, but I do still think that the tragedy of Ursula's unrequited love for Andrea is so much more real, and therefore more touching, if she is played more obviously in her 50s. After all Dr Mead, in what might have been an unconscious defence of his own unspoken hopes of a relationship with Olga, says of the sisters, whom she has described as 'the old ladies': "They're not so old. My age." and Olga hastily apologises in case she has caused offence. I'm sure the parallel between the widowed doctor's interest in young Olga and the naïve spinster's interest in her young charge wasn't lost on anyone, and I reckon that the irony of our different responses to the aspirations of these two would-be lovers is much keener when the age-gap in each case is similar.

And so to the balance of the play, and here I felt you didn't put a foot wrong. There is a remarkable amount of subtext hinted at in the stage directions and I thought you had explored this with great dexterity, finding a lot of wry humour in the characters' quite complex inter-relationships. At the heart of the play is our sympathy for Ursula and her desperate, but ultimately doomed, infatuation with this remarkable young man. I sensed that you recognised the importance of keeping the audience 'on-side' by showing, but down-playing, the manipulative aspects of her behaviour. Olga actually puts her finger on it when she tells Andrea that he seems to be more a prisoner of 'the old ladies' than their guest, but he, with characteristic insouciance, makes light of this. And his completely, and innocently, platonic affection for Ursula was charmingly indicated, even though she of course would have so badly wanted it to be otherwise. I don't suppose I was alone in feeling that his sudden departure for London was actually a much-needed escape from what was beginning to look a bit as though it might develop into a genteel version of Stephen King's *Misery*, with kid gloves and lavender water, but our divided loyalties on this score were probably what made the play so interesting and memorable.

It terms of the nuts and bolts of directing I thought you did an excellent job, making the most of a very good script and a stellar cast. Not once did I sense an unmotivated move, and nor did I see any masking. Grouping was very natural, and extremely well managed, especially in that small bedroom, and in the garden room. Entrances were nicely timed and exits were always purposeful, and I particularly liked the effect of the unseen, but easily imagined, staircase which led from the sitting room up to the spare bedroom, and also the arch which led off to what we could readily accept was the kitchen and presumably the front door. It all seemed so real – I remember thinking "I could live here, with that view"! Pace seemed just right to me, after a slightly stilted start (see under Acting), and continuity was pretty much flawless. All in all a very impressive piece of work – bravo.

Acting

You'd assembled a very able and experienced cast, and you'd coped pretty well with the age challenges which amateur theatre so often poses. Most importantly it seemed that you'd allowed plenty of time for rehearsal and I got the impression of a team who were very well prepared. Not for a moment did I expect to hear a prompt and there was no hint of a breakdown in continuity on the Thursday evening that I came.

Janet Widdington – Maggy Goodall

This was a clear and well-thought-out characterisation, Maggy, and of course your stagecraft is always very good. However I felt that all-too obvious wig got in the way of credibility and I think playing Janet with natural hair would have helped quite a bit. A lot less hot too – I felt for you, under those lights. Knowing that you and Irene have worked together closely before, I also expected a comfortable (though not always easy-going) sisterly relationship from the outset, but for some reason their interplay seemed a bit stilted initially on that Thursday night. However you quickly got into your stride and their early rivalry was well indicated. Once Janet realised how smitten Ursula had become, you played the elder sister with great understanding and compassion. “Just let me go through it” Ursula pleads, and indeed in your hands that is just what Janet did, sympathetically and supportively. Good work.

Ursula Widdington – Irene Glynn

This is a very demanding role, Irene, and after that surprisingly hesitant start you displayed good stagecraft and gave us some amusing and very well-executed miming, rather wickedly taking the mickey out of Janet in particular. Additionally I thought you found an interesting degree of emotional immaturity and vulnerability in her which went a long way towards explaining why she fell so hard for Andrea, and which helped to keep her real in our eyes. I think this is why you hooked us so effectively and kept us on-side, as an audience. The pettiness she showed in competing with her sister for this young man’s interest, as well as her connivance with the deception over Olga’s letter, and her petulance in her dealings with Dr Mead over the return of his violin, could all have been off-putting, but were well-balanced by her obvious pride in his progress under her patient tutelage, and later her awe at his prodigious musical talent. This was clearly a painfully unreciprocated infatuation, rather than true love. If she had genuinely loved him then she would have encouraged him to go and live his life to the full, but who amongst us would be so unselfish in these circumstances? I’m sure many of us recognised the bind in which she found herself, and sympathised with the pain she experienced when he left. That final scene, when I think we saw Ursula battling with both pride and loss in equal measure, clutching Janet’s hand, her cheeks wet with tears, was really very moving. A fine performance - well done.

Dorcas – Ann Cook

As a supporting role this was a delight from start to finish! Another slightly off-putting wig, but I could almost believe that Dorcas might have worn a really cheap one like that if her own hair had been thinning... The accent was appropriately West country and once registered seemed entirely natural, which is how it should be of course. Wonderful timing, which got some really good laughs because – as with all effective comedy – we could see what she was thinking and could anticipate what she was going to say. And you played the sub-text for all it was worth – no subtlety here, but it was very welcome as light relief and we loved it. Excellent.

Dr Mead – Mick Glynn

I thought you played the rather pathetic widower, mooning over Olga, with conviction, but I think greater contrast was required in his professional manner; somehow he didn’t carry as much of the gravitas one would normally associate with an experienced doctor – not only in his dealings with his young patient but in his relationship with the sisters. I did however find his dislike and mistrust of all things German convincing, and I thought you handled the abrupt change in his mood, once he realised that Olga was only interested in Andrea, rather well. You also mimed the simple tune on the violin with complete credibility – indeed at that point I could almost believe it was being played live. Presumably it was recorded by Linda West? Nicely done.

Andrea – Michal Jurkowski

It was a great pleasure to see this role performed with such truthfulness. Of course you had a natural advantage, Michal, in that by temporarily turning off your knowledge of English, you could readily represent the young Polish man, injured and lost in a strange country, exactly as the play required! But there was no mistaking the talent you brought to this performance. It was extremely well physicalised – the painstaking learning of English words and phrases (and the pride in doing so), the wolfing down of the porridge and later the star-gazey pie, as though he was ravenously hungry, the first painful steps on that broken ankle, the drunken return from the village dance, his obvious affection for Ursula and what seemed to be a sympathetic understanding of what pain

she was going through – this was an extremely accomplished piece of acting, without any evidence of technique, and I found your characterisation completely credible, as well as incorporating an undefined and rather attractive sense of dangerous unpredictability, because it seemed that, through you, Andrea was reacting in the moment and therefore that anything might happen. The kiss he gave Olga was an example – it seemed completely spontaneous and indeed I thought it was, largely because of her wonderful reaction (see below), though I have just checked and there it was, scripted. This is rare skill! If you want any criticism at all, I think you did pretty well at miming the playing of the doctor's violin, but it could in truth have been a bit more consistent. It is a tiny point, because of course we all knew in our heads that the music was recorded, but in our hearts we wanted to believe it was live, there in The Warehouse, just for us. Bravo.

Olga Danilova – Stella Davies

I last saw you, Stella, in *Dangerous Obsession* playing Mick's stage wife. This performance as Olga however was in a different league, I thought. You needed to be quite a bit younger of course, but you achieved this quite well with the costume and head-scarf of an artist, and I could entirely believe that you were sketching on the beach, looking out over the sea. The central European accent wasn't completely reliable but we got the idea. The barely polite disdain she showed for poor Dr Mead was extremely well conveyed, though he didn't take the hint - sadly. In contrast her interest in Andrea was unmistakable and there was definite sexual chemistry apparent in your performance. What impressed me most however was her surprise at suddenly being kissed – you made it seem very real, and not unwelcome. Very good.

SUMMARY

I thought this was an impressive production in all respects and gave us an interesting and extremely entertaining evening. The quality of the presentation was exceptionally good overall, the direction was clear and effective, and the standard of acting was high. It seems to me that IES are on a bit of a roll at the moment – long may that continue.

It was a shame, I thought, that – at least on that Thursday night – the auditorium was only half full. Maybe the play isn't all that well known, or perhaps lots of people watched the film which was shown on TV recently I gather, or maybe it was just too hot and people preferred to sit in their gardens. Whatever the reason, I reckon the people of Ilminster and beyond missed a real treat!

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

Philip de Glanville

10.07.18