

The Safari Party  
by  
Tim Firth

Iminster Entertainments Society  
The Warehouse Theatre  
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**The play:**

I have once seen a production of Tim Firth's *Neville's Island* but I had never encountered *The Safari Party* until it dropped into my letter-box. Firth's 'adoption' by Alan Ayckbourn has been hugely beneficial to the younger playwright, both in terms of his theatrical profile and, perhaps more importantly, to his development as a writer. Clearly there are similarities of style and construction, with Firth's work having a more contemporary sound to its dialogue but with fewer of the darker undertones that have increasingly characterised Ayckbourn's work. My first impressions on reading the play were that the basic story seemed quite contrived and some of the plotting rather clumsy, but I was impressed with the way the dialogue skipped along and also with the characters who, it seemed to me, were mostly credible and not unduly caricatured or two-dimensional. Only the character of Inga failed to ring true but, with significantly less on-stage time than most of the others, that's not entirely surprising. So, once I'd read the play I was really looking forward to travelling to Iminster to see what IES would make of it.

This production came hot-on-the-heels of an Ayckbourn that I'd seen and adjudicated just a couple of weeks before so I was interested to see how Tim Firth on the stage would compare to his mentor, especially as the play I'd seen – *Absurd Person Singular* – has a similarly small cast and also demands three different sets.

**Presentation:**

There is a very large team of people, thirteen in all, credited with the construction and painting of the three sets this play demands. Clearly an efficient and well-drilled group is vital if the two total changes are to be completed successfully. As far as I could see this was achieved without any hitches, so all credit to **Nicola Langhorn**. More of a puzzle, given the number of people involved, were some of the more disappointing aspects of those sets, such as the irregular heights of the flats of the Shellmadine kitchen and Voysey conservatory and also the very visible hinges between them. The kitchen also had no window, which, although it dispensed with the need for the additional complication of a view, only added to the sense of unreality. Those responsible for painting this set had done a good job at indicating where the fixtures and fittings had previously been. The Voysey's conservatory was more convincing although it didn't really have the air of a genuinely lived-in space having no pictures or ornaments. In my opinion, the decision to leave all the doors and windows unglazed was a serious mistake. I'm sure the absence of internal doors made the construction and changing of the sets more straightforward but it also contributed to a general feeling of "maybe it's not great but it'll do" about the sets for the first two acts. Inga's

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lean-to shed was by far the most successful of the sets with its wealth of entirely credible antiques such as the barrel, the hip bath and the pitchfork, as well as the cornucopia of bric-a-brac.

The lighting provided by **Brian Perkins** generally covered the whole stage area although there were some unfortunate areas of shadow, particularly in Act I. I thought the balance of the lighting was particularly effective in Act III, making a significant contribution to the overall atmosphere. The timing of the outside security light was good although I couldn't really understand why the lamp which provided that effect was actually hanging inside the conservatory. All the sound effects seemed to come from one side of the stage, irrespective of the supposed source. The sound of the gunshots was not convincing.

The four-woman props team assembled an impressive range of hand and stage props. As previously mentioned, the dressing of the Act III set was very effective but there was also great attention to detail elsewhere, such as the ill-matched glasses in Act I, and also the crockery and cutlery in Act II. It was unfortunate that you didn't ensure that the crockery would smash as it was thrown to the floor in Act III.

There are no programme listings for costumes, hair or make-up so it is to the credit of the cast that these aspects of the presentation generally worked well. The clothes worn by the young people were believably understated and Esther was clearly, and convincingly, trying too hard. Lol's golf-themed sweater was very good.

I am repeatedly fascinated by the choice of plays that societies present and the reasons for those choices. A significant factor in the success (or otherwise) of a play such as *The Safari Party* is the quality of 'the visuals', particularly the three different sets. At the end of this production I was left wondering just how much consideration had been given, during the decision-making process, to the importance of these presentational aspects and how they could be successfully realised.

### **Production:**

On the face of it this play might seem to be a fairly straightforward and unremarkable British comedy of the type that's been the mainstay of theatre, both professional and amateur, for a very long time. The basic premise of the pretentious and upwardly-mobile couple being duped by the down-trodden and overlooked outsider is pretty familiar, but to this mix Tim Firth adds a pair of brothers newly-bereaved in tragic circumstances, a table of dubious provenance and an ever-more complicated web of story-telling and deceit. The pivotal role of the director is to create a vision for the play that keeps all these plates spinning whilst keeping the audience amused as well as guessing what the eventual outcome will be.

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It's usually only when writing about Pinter that an adjudicator finds him or herself commenting on stillness and pauses. It's even more unusual when adjudicating a comedy, but in this production the directors' ability to identify key pauses and important moments of stillness, along with the actors' skill in carrying them off convincingly, were an important element. Bridget and Dan's stillness in Act III effectively underpinned Adam's outburst as did, in Act II, the awkwardness caused by the realisation of the extent of Inga's duping of both the Voyseys and the Shellmadine brothers.

Elsewhere, being a comedy, the play demands pace and a sense of momentum, both of which were often energetically provided by Dan and Adam. This was particularly true at the very beginning of the play where the conversation concerning the flat-pack table, the time and the approaching guests had a real sense of urgency and drive. By contrast, the exchange between Bridget and Esther in Act III was taken more slowly and the result was touching and intimate. It is much to their credit that directors **Dave Goodall** and **Celia Crookes** were clearly determined that this production wouldn't lose its sense of forward momentum given to it by the opening few pages. Poor pacing is, so often, the curse of amateur comedy. It was a shame, then, that this resulted in the lines (and laughs) being lost in the actors' hurried delivery and this was further compounded by the often inconsistent and largely unconvincing Cheshire accents. Obviously I don't know the play as well as the directors but on reading it I wasn't aware of anything in it that absolutely demands the Cheshire setting. With several of the actors seeming to lack both confidence and proficiency with the required accent it might have been advisable to relocate the action of the play to somewhere more familiar.

The relationships and interactions between the two couples are important aspects of this play and here the directors made some wise choices. The personality differences between the two brothers were clearly demonstrated by the actors and this was underscored by the physical contrast between them. The characters of Lol and Esther, on the other hand, have spent years perfecting their sniping skills and there was a convincing air of tension between them, and not only when they were speaking directly to each other.

Effective comedy is very much dependent on good timing, on the actors listening to each other, and on their awareness of the audience. Obviously it is very difficult to predict what the audience will find funny and where the laughs will come but it's important that the director works with the cast on comedy techniques such as 'riding the laugh', double-takes and facial expression. I feel a little more time in rehearsal spent on such techniques would have benefited both the cast and the audience.

Directing a play whilst also taking a leading part is challenging, as the two roles demand very different skills and levels of involvement. Having a co-director was an interesting way of attempting to overcome this although I do

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wonder how possible it is for two people to not only share an identical vision but also agree on how this should be turned into a theatrical reality.

### **Acting:**

Six characters, three settings, one summer evening and a positive Pandora's Box of revelations and strife. That is the challenge faced by the actors and the journey that the audience has to travel with them.

**Ben Overd** made an impressive debut with the adult group at IES. You showed a great deal of stage awareness, occupying the space confidently. Along with the character of Adam you provided the engine of the play giving it much of its energy and forward momentum. A particular strength of the performance was your use of facial expression to communicate to us, the audience, much of what was going on in Dan's head, especially his growing awareness of the true circumstances of his father's death and the reasons for the damage to the table. You showed us a Dan who was both passionate and compassionate. I think there was scope for an even more breathless and desperate telling of the story of the table to the Voyseys in Act I.

Adam is the older, more confident of the two brothers. He takes his responsibilities towards Dan very seriously and this was an aspect of the character that was very effectively brought out in **Chris Williamson's** performance. You demonstrated a great deal of stage presence, having an awareness of both yourself and also the other actors on stage with you. There were times when the clarity of your delivery was not good and I don't think that was entirely due to the demands of the unfamiliar accent. A high level of skill is required in balancing the pace and energy of a performance with the need to be clearly heard and understood but I feel confident that you have the ability to achieve this in future performances.

The hallmark of Dave Goodall's portrayal of the self-opinionated and domineering Lol was the excellent comic timing. You knew exactly when and how to deliver his cruel one-liners and also when to hold the response for a split second longer in order to achieve maximum impact. You effectively captured this character's energy as well as his insensitivity with the result that it was more than clear that Lol is the cross that Esther has to bear.

**Jen Boxell's** Bridget was entirely recognisable as a savvy, bored and frustrated young woman, frequently embarrassed by her parents (especially her boorish father) and desperate to break away from everything they represent. Through your reactions and facial expressions you were very good at maintaining Bridget's demeanour even when she wasn't the focus of attention. Your diction became unclear at times, mainly, I think, as a result of speaking too quickly in an unfamiliar accent.

**Maggy Goodall** is an experienced and confident actor who brought some necessary weight (in the nicest possible sense) to a cast largely consisting of

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young people and returners. It was clear from your first entrance that you feel comfortable on the stage and this communicated itself both to the other actors and to the audience. I've mentioned before the lovely scene in Act III with Bridget which was underpinned by your sense of stillness and affection. You seemed more comfortable with the accent than some of the other actors although there were times when the volume, and therefore the audibility, of your voice dropped away.

Although **Wendy Hall** has been absent from IES for some years she clearly hasn't been a stranger to the stage. You did well to bring depth to a largely under-written character, allowing the audience to feel some warmth for Inga. I felt you could have helped this even more by lowering the pitch of your voice throughout and this would have been particularly helpful at the end in convincing us of the truth of Inga's unexpected outpouring of emotion and declaration of remorse.

### **Conclusion:**

One of the defining aspects of this production was the sense of enjoyment and commitment which was clearly communicated across the footlights. A play like *The Safari Party* can only really work when everyone involved – cast, director, backstage crew, front-of-house – all pull in the same direction and in support of a shared cause. It's important too that, in an ensemble piece, a play with no 'leading' characters, that there should be no attempted on-stage one-upmanship or grand-standing, and this was certainly the case with IES. I'd like to express my thanks to all involved in this show and I'm sure the good people of Ilminster will happily and willingly return for the forthcoming production of *Deep Blue Sea*.

Alex Webb

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