

## A Bunch of Amateurs

By Ian Hislop & Nick Newman

IES, Ilminster – Friday 26 October 2018

### **The Play**

Loosely based on the film script written by Hislop and Newman, and chosen for Her Majesty's 2008 Royal Film Performance, the subsequent stage version was coloured by the experience of working with an actual Hollywood legend during the making of the original film. Not only did this lend a touch of verisimilitude to the re-worked script, but, according to Newman, gave it the flavour of "a strange case of art imitating life imitating art", as rehearsals for the fated production of King Lear mirror the story of a fading Hollywood star who gets his come-uppance at the hands of the diverse individuals who make up the Stratford Players amateur dramatic group. More than simple comic farce, there is certainly some wonderfully funny dialogue, and laughs aplenty, but there is also a more poignant side to the piece, as Jefferson embarks on his voyage of self-discovery, ironically saving the Players in the process. The play is punctuated by snatches of the Fool's songs from King Lear, not only to cover the various scene changes, but also providing a nice counterpoint to the jokes. That said, the script is full of comic lines constantly topping one another, not to mention running gags. Mary's constant confusing of Jefferson's past roles with those of other famous film actors, to his increasing frustration and her growing embarrassment is a recurring motif which becomes ever funnier in the repetition, as of course, is Denis's determination to experiment with the most gruesome way of removing Gloucester's eyes. A good sense of pace and timing is demanded from the actors throughout. There are also some lovely instances of the use of contemporary elements in the play: rehearsing via Skype, twitter trending and the prurience of the modern press, for instance. If the script is anything to go by, this should be an entertaining evening of theatre.

### **Presentation**

The tabs opened to reveal a sparsely furnished space with empty black walls, save for a rather tatty noticeboard at the back and a few items scattered about, with functional table and chairs in the centre. This was nicely evocative of a blank rehearsal-cum-theatrical space in a rather bleak barn, long-standing home to the Stratford Players, and currently under threat. The white back-drop which appeared to denote Jefferson Steel's arrival at Heathrow didn't quite work for me as it didn't really give an impression of an airport arrivals hall. I wonder if the same effect could have been achieved by simply having him centred in a spotlight with airport sounds and flashing camera bulbs going off

around him. The revolving segment of staging to take us into Mary's bed & breakfast worked very well, allowing scene changes to be fluid and efficient. The décor of the B & B was simple and evocative, with a nice touch of faux wooden beams set against the pale pink walls. The lavish backdrop for the transformation of bland rehearsal space into the stage set for the King Lear vignettes was quite splendid – the amateur group had come into funds at last.

The original script includes quite an extensive props list, all of which appeared and were used appropriately. Of particular note were Gloucester's eyeballs (more of those later) and the list of Jefferson's 'essential' requirements: the appearance of Denis on his mother's mobility buggy/'limousine' was a lovely comic moment, the laptop/'home cinema', 'pool-table' and fresh flowers ironically presented – perhaps the supermarket bag could have revealed a few more assorted bottles, but the point was made.

Costumes were generally uncomplicated, and appropriate to the characters. Nigel's smart blazer, assortment of colourful bow ties and carefully placed handkerchiefs were perfectly chosen, and Mary's hopeful change from her usual trousers into what she imagines to be a rather fetching skirt on hearing of Jefferson's insatiable sexaholic nature was a lovely touch. Denis' outrageous beard for the part of Gloucester was nicely over the top, and used to perfect effect during the final King Lear scene. I wonder whether Jefferson might have made his first entrance more effectively by sporting an American flying jacket rather than the cowboy shirt. It might have helped to establish his character as an arrogantly pretentious film star from the very beginning. However his subsequent descent into more a more relaxed style of jeans/shirt/t-shirt nicely reflected the gradual stripping away of pretensions on his journey of self-discovery. The final King Lear costumes were a lovely contrast to the expected cloaks-made-from-old-curtains, thanks to the generosity of the 'gentlemen of the press'. Make-up was relatively unobtrusive and appropriate, Jefferson's hairstyle being excruciatingly apt for the "finest head of natural hair that money can buy".

Lighting was for the most part unobtrusive and effective. There could perhaps have been a simple spotlight and a few more camera flashes to more clearly define the scene of Jefferson's arrival at the airport. The near darkness during the 'storm scene' accompanying Jefferson's personal unravelling was effective, and there was good use of light on the smoke as the sprinklers rained down on him. There was also good use of focal lighting for the Lear vignettes.

The theme for 'The Entertainer' provided a suitably evocative accompaniment to the opening of Acts 1 and 2. The use of individual recorded voices to cover the scene changes was a nice reminder of human foibles, juxtaposing the play's theme with that of King Lear. The script suggests the various

song snippets as being sung by different members of the cast, but as these were recorded, it was not clear who was actually singing them. I wonder if there would have been scope for finding some different tunes. The smoke alarm was a lovely touch, but could perhaps have been a tad louder for maximum effect. There was good use of thunder, establishing the setting for Jefferson's own personal storm scene.

Scene changes took place efficiently for the most part, and it was good to see the inclusion of stage crew as members of the Players at various points onstage and at the final curtain call. There was only one rather lengthy change, but this may have down to the actors having to move quickly from physiotherapy session to takeaway scene in Mary's B & B, and was adequately covered by the recurring musical theme.

### **Production**

The interpretation and casting of the play were, in my opinion, pretty much spot on. We got what we expected – a thoroughly entertaining evening of theatre. Pace was generally good, with very few dips. Jessica's first entrance, and Jefferson's shock at seeing her, could perhaps have been a little more pointed as a pivotal moment, with a greater element of surprise from the other actors. Another pivotal moment is when Dorothy takes the 'phone call from their sponsor pulling out, which could perhaps have been more marked. There was no sense of consternation here, which could have made her "effing effer" account even funnier. Grouping and movement overall appeared natural, Nigel's blatant attempt to upstage Jefferson being a nicely planned aberration. Entries and exits were well timed, with perhaps just the barest hint of delay on Denis' mobility scooter entrance. The dialogue was pacey allowing the comic progression to flow beautifully. There were only a few occasions when the actors mistimed a comic line so that it was lost in audience laughter. The contemporary elements in the play were for the most part, used to good comic effect, although the rehearsal by Skype could have worked better with the addition of the familiar Skype theme tune, and a bit of movement from Albany, perhaps a wave. I wonder if it might have been possible to have transmitted a fainter disembodied voice here, rather than it booming over the speaker. Jefferson's personal storm scene was nicely crafted, and one could not help but feel sorry for the fading star brought down. The smoke machine and sprinkler were beautifully timed, although the water could perhaps have been a little more abundant, making Jefferson a bit more wet and bedraggled, and giving Dorothy more to mop up, as there seemed to be a bit of a drop in the action here. The jinxed Lear section was carefully crafted, with some delightful vignettes manipulating the audience into imagining the play had morphed into a genuine Shakespearean tragic performance, only to be blasted back into laughter with the springing forth of Gloucester's googly eyes and

outrageous beard. There was a lovely touch to end the curtailed performance where Denis/ Gloucester somewhat apologetically insists on a full health & safety inspection of the chocolates. The finale, with the whole cast finally coming together to sing the Fool's song leading into the curtain call worked well, ending the play on a rousing note.

### **Acting**

Dorothy Nettle - Felicity Forrester

This was a self-assured performance, with a hint of vulnerability. Dorothy is nearly always in control, using the quiet approach to manipulate her actors to get what she wants, with a greater or lesser degree of success. She has a keen sense of irony, is calm and level-headed, and certainly knows how to handle a prima donna like Jefferson Steel. Her inner steel did not quite come across, and you could perhaps have injected a little more forcefulness into the character. She was just a bit too calm to be believable, for instance when receiving the blow by 'phone that their sponsor had pulled out. I wonder if she could for once in a while have 'lost her rag'. All in all however, an efficient, controlled performance.

Nigel Dewsbury - Eric Beckley

Pompous, authoritative, vain - altogether a rather nasty piece of work, and the bane of many an am-dram group. This was a polished performance of a totally believable character, with an excellent sense of comic timing and suitably fruity voice. The colourful bow ties and artfully arranged handkerchiefs were perfect additions to the characterisation. I loved the way you carried it through into his portrayal of Kent in the 'real' Lear scenes.

Mary Plunkett – Maggy Goodall

A jolly, enthusiastic, yet slightly timid woman. She is a bit of a doormat, unashamedly adoring of her hero, but can be vindictive when things don't go her way. Not the brightest cookie in the book. There was a lovely touch of her changing into a skirt at the hint of Jefferson's being a sexaholic, but putting herself very firmly back into trousers again before her wonderfully angry outburst as Goneril, being, as she sees it, a wronged woman. Mary constantly gets it wrong over Jefferson's starring roles, but remains impervious to his outraged responses, and keeps trying – you managed this well, but could have held back fractionally on some lines to avoid them getting lost amidst the audience laughter. You obviously enjoyed playing the role, and it showed.

Denis Dobbins - Mick Glynn

A useful handyman type, full of ideas for gadgets that may or may not work, both on stage and in his working life. A bit of a loose cannon for a theatrical group, being both indispensable and a thorn in any director's side. This role needs a good sense of comic timing, which you brought to it in abundance, and the accent was appropriate to the character. You managed the business of Gloucester's eyes and beard well, and showed some skilful use of understatement. I particularly liked the hushed discussion with Dorothy/the Fool on the need for a full health & safety inspection bringing the Lear section to a close. Altogether a very watchful, convincing performance.

Jefferson Steel – Dave Goodall

A larger-than-life persona, with a big stage presence. Jefferson is a fading Hollywood star, outrageous in his arrogance and demanding behaviour, yet at the same time increasingly aware of his own absurdity and fallibility. One might expect the casting of a naturally taller actor for the role, but you more than made up for a smaller physical stature by the great energy and dynamism you brought to the part, perhaps even going a little too much over the top in places. A slightly hesitant start soon gave way to a splendid display of brash petulance, as you raged at your agent over the phone and treated an astonished cast to a display of continuous tantrums. The American accent was perhaps a little rocky, but this was arguably superseded by your energy and good sense of comic timing. Speaking Shakespearean lines convincingly badly is not easy to do, but you managed this well, tackling Lear's speeches with more confidence as the plot develops and you learn what it is to experience true emotion. An entertaining performance, in which you managed to elicit the sympathy of your audience towards an essentially unlikeable character.

Lauren Bell – Paula Denning

Probably the least rounded character of the play, and difficult to get a handle on in terms of characterisation. She has the appearance of a sexy dollybird, but there is more to her under the skin. You looked lovely in the part, and while perhaps a little tentative at first, grew in confidence as the play went on. Your physiotherapy scene with Jefferson allowed you to become more self-assured in the role, and you brought some lovely natural sparkle to the character thereafter, particularly when she is offered the part of Goneril.

Jessica Steel – Emily Dixon

Jefferson's rather pert teenage daughter, who has been largely neglected by her Hollywood star of a father, and is perfectly used to his outrageous tantrums and displays of bad behaviour. One might

imagine her as an independent young lady, who has become somewhat cynical at the lifestyle of her dysfunctional parents, and has been brought up with plenty of financial, but little emotional security. She could have grown into a spoilt little madam, but has instead developed into a mature young lady and genuinely talented actress, who can teach her father a thing or two about life, if he will only choose to listen. This was an accomplished, believable performance, with a reasonably convincing American accent. Your lines were occasionally lost in delivery which was a little too fast every now and again, but overall you succeeded in conveying a vulnerable, yet at the same time self-assured young woman – a worthy Cordelia to your wayward father.

### **Summary**

There might have been several years' delay before performance rights were granted, but it was well worth the wait. All in all this was a splendid production, and it was quite obvious that the cast enjoyed themselves as much as the audience! A brief note about the programme, which I forgot to mention earlier – it was a lovely touch to include the characters' personal biogs – very amusing and fitting. Apologies if I have got any details wrong, or failed to credit anyone.

Liz Holliss