

LETTICE AND LOVAGE

By Peter Shaffer

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THE PLAY

This is a challenging play to put on for a number of reasons. Firstly there is the need to create three very different sets, two of them in the first Act. Secondly it is by and large a two hander, with the two main females having to carry the bulk of the play with just two other characters and a small group of tourists involved. This means a tremendous amount of line learning for the two actresses. They also need to keep up a good pace and have such eccentric characters to play that they need to maintain very high energy levels. For me, the play's biggest difficulty is Act 2 Scene 1 with the repetition of visits lead by Lettice in ever increasing flamboyant mode. How do you cast the crowd of tourists? You are essentially asking a group of people to turn up to be in just the first part of a play and to have little to say or do in the way of scripted lines. Then, with the constant repetition of talks by Lettice, albeit with increasing embellishment, it is easy for the start of the play to start to drag unless the "tourists" really give their range of responses their all.

It is an attractive play because of its whimsical wittiness and the beautifully drawn characters of Lettice and Lotte. The close and empathetic relationship which develops between these two very dissimilar ladies is very endearing. There are also some very enjoyable observations of the eccentricities of British culture. The obligatory need to visit stately homes whilst on holiday, often at considerable speed if the house concerned has little to engage the general public or is hampered by the unimaginative presentation of the guides who are engaged. Then there are those individuals who grew up touring theatres with their theatrical parents; some honing a craft which took them on to reasonable success in the field of entertainment and others who, like Lettice, inherited a tendency to over-dramatise the ordinary events of life with over-imaginative and flowery interpretations, making it difficult to establish lasting and meaningful relationships with lesser mortals. Finally there is the popular pastime of mocking modern architecture much enjoyed by Prince Charles, who is known to have described some of them as monstrous carbuncles.

Lettice and Lovage has not always been received to great acclaim, with many American audiences not really understanding its very English humour and finding it tedious. Some, in Britain were disappointed with it. It was Shaffer's first comedy in twenty years and audiences were more used to expecting high drama from him in plays like *Equus*, *Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Amadeus*. It was written for Maggie Smith to play the lead role and it would be tempting to play Lettice in true Maggie style and not to create something fresh and original.

So this was a bold choice of play and I was intrigued to see how Lyn would overcome the possible pitfalls inherent in its presentation. This was especially the case since this was the first time that Lyn had directed at the Warehouse and both the stage and many in the "workforce" would be unfamiliar.

PRESENTATION

As I have already said, set design was the first challenge of this play. How to create those three sets in such a way that they were convincing and yet practical enough that they could be changed with reasonable speed, especially given that there was no interval between Act 1 and Act 2? I think this was the right decision since a short interval so early in the play given what I have already said about Act 1 could easily lose you your audience. If anyone could come up with the solution it would be Dave Goodall, not only responsible for the set design and I assume leading the team who constructed it but also stage managing those complex scene changes. I admit that although I spotted the hinges on the flats I am still not entirely sure I know how you did it Dave. We were presented with three sets which looked totally unrelated to each other and yet which we knew had to share some common elements. Substantial features just disappeared as if by magic like that huge staircase, to be replaced in Act 2 with the raised pavement outside the basement flat and the narrow staircase that lead down into it. Doors changed colour, walls changed colour and set dressing was very detailed. This was not a West End theatre after all but a community theatre. I know the stage has quite a lot of depth but I have no idea how much space you have in the wings. Clearly extra pieces of set had to be stored in the space you had. I therefore assume that the walls of the sets were brought forward and in to allow this space. This also helped to create an intimacy for the action.

Taking each scene individually there was a lot to appreciate. The grand staircase in Act 1 was nicely painted to make it look elaborate. The two chairs looked as though they could have come from a baronial hall with the inevitable thistles – a nice touch used with humour. I loved the wrought iron candle holder; you must have been pleased that you could borrow it for this set. I liked the wood panelling, though wondered where the paintings and coats of arms I was expecting were. However the change to Miss Shoen's office made it obvious why this would have been a step too far. The two archways worked well and I was so impressed when one disappeared and the other was transformed into a door for Act 2. I presume that the staircase had rolled backstage and the extra flat had either been brought in or folded out on hinges. The office was completed with a good solid desk adorned with telephone and tray of letters etc. The hat stand with the coat we were to see Lotte wearing later, helped to make this large space seem less empty. The two chairs from Act 1 fitted in nicely. I liked the Trust posters which were created, I hope intentionally, to look old fashioned and dreary compared with the bright advertising we would normally associate with the late 1980s, telling us yet more about the stiff and conservative nature of the Preservation Trust.

This transformation was achieved in a fairly short time considering the weight of the pieces being moved and the noises of the straining of the team were masked somewhat by the Tudor style music. The second transformation was achieved in similar period of time but with even more startling effect. The change of wall colour and door colour for a moment made me believe that these were completely new flats. I then spotted the hinges and now assume that somehow each flat was able to turn to reveal the reverse. Do tell me if I am wrong. However the doors seemed to be two new colours on both sides or was I wrong? Did you really hang a different set of doors? The raised window with the view of the pavement above was essential and so good, along with the staircase outside the flat. The intercom looked authentic. This set was so beautifully dressed to suit Lettice's flamboyant nature. I loved the giant fan and large fringed shawl which transformed the desk from the previous scene, along with all the interest artefacts on top. The large armchair with its very

colourful throw and the two chairs which fitted the descriptions in the script well were all good. I appreciated the Les Barbares poster and the two portraits, one of whom I assume was Alice. A lot of artistry had gone into all the posters and paintings. Who I wonder is the artist? After the interval I was pleased to see that objects had appeared or been rearranged to suggest the passage of time. It was great to see all of Lettice's elaborate clothes hanging on the unusual coat stand – another great loan?

All of the scene changes were done as quickly as was conceivably possible but none the less the audience were understandably chattering and this means that they have ceased to concentrate on the play and are onto other topics. It is not ideal. I found myself wondering what could have been done to keep their interest going. I was also disappointed that each set did not receive the round of applause it deserved when the curtains opened. I wondered whether it would have been an idea to leave the tabs open for the scene changes and let the audience see how the transformations occurred. This would maybe have engaged them and they might have appreciated the sheer ingenuity of what you had achieved – maybe you might have received your well deserved applause. Just a thought and isn't hindsight always such a good thing?

Brian Perkins had a bit more scope to be creative with the sound than the lighting in this production I felt. The first Act required fading between each mini scene and gradually brightening each scene as the summer progressed and this was done. Otherwise each scene just required general interior lighting. The only shadow that I noticed was one upstage left in Act 1 Scene 2 when Lotte's face was in shadow for a brief time but otherwise the faces of all the characters were lit well enough for facial expressions to be read. The Elizabethan music was provided as required though I was hoping for a more marked contrast between lugubrious and mournful at the start graduating up to very lively for 1:D as required by the script. I think this would have helped to lift the pace in these difficult scenes. Similarly if the baby crying had been loud and a bit longer in duration it would have presented even more of an obstacle for Lettice gamely trying to hold everyone's attention, especially if a number of tourists had crowded round all offering conflicting advice quite loudly on what should be done to quieten the child. The intercom sounds in Act 2 were good, a loud buzzer and the voice of Lotte not seeming to simply come from back stage but having a tinny quality. Other sounds were provided as required by the effects plot.

Chris Ackerman had done a great job on set dressing and prop acquisition as already mentioned above. The baby in the baby carrier looked almost alive. The fluffy cat in Act 2 looked really good. The fold down table worked really well as it allowed the one leaf to be raised by Lotte for the mock interview scene. The elaborate bottle of cordial and the decorated glass goblets looked great. The log for the block was also good, though a generous daubing of red paint would have given it the drama that I am sure Lettice would have insisted on. The general paraphernalia in the basement flat was great for telling us more about Lettice's character and eye for the theatrical. The halberds which appeared for the last scene looked good and we could imagine one of them being responsible for Lotte's injury. These and the swords looked like they had been made for the play.

Kate White and the cast had between them provided the array of costumes which were needed. I very much appreciated the array of layers worn by Lettice in the small scenes in Act 1, cleverly changing to suggest the passage of time and also suggesting a sort of hippie eccentricity. The black cloak and green hat and long gloves looked very dramatic in Act 1 Scene 2, though the arm holes of

the cloak where a bit restrictive and made it difficult for Maggy to use the dramatic arm gestures she was trying to do. The red dress with fabric painted gold crowns was exactly as required by the script. Both the ethnic embroidered gowns Lettice wore in the comfort of her flat looked good along with the good array of bright scarves. Lotte's cloths were such a contrast, very grey in hue in the earlier scenes and then the plaid skirt and horrendous mustard top looked so right for her character. Lettice's disguise for the re-enactment of the execution was good. I especially like the bird mask rather than a straight executioner's mask. The whole look warranted Mr Bardolph's open mouthed expression.

This was a challenging play for the stage management team – I assume Dave didn't do it all alone. Despite my comments above, I think the stage management of the scene changes was good. There was such a lot of heavy moving to do and then all of the set dressing and it was done as quickly as one could have asked for. I have also mentioned the attention to continuity where changes occurred over time right down to the change of the colour of the fringed shawl covering the table and the movement of clothes on the coat rack.

I have never written so much in the presentation section of an adjudication and this is testimony to the importance of the production elements in the overall success of the play. Well done one and all.

PRODUCTION

A typically English piece of whimsy requiring good direction of two actresses playing polar opposites who then develop a deep mutual interest and friendship, with a sprinkling of farce along the way needs a director with the skill of Lyn Lockyer to pull it off. The play was slow to get underway but by the end of Act 2 reached a climax that was both poignant and comedic and so sent the audience off for the interval with a sense of anticipation for the final Act.

I have been pondering the problematic first four mini-scenes which I felt failed to gain the sort of momentum needed to grab the audience early on. This is an issue for the play which was recognised by Peter Shaffer and which he addresses in his note at the beginning. I think I would have gone with his alternative solution and kept to a small group of four, but used experienced actors and then giving them a real chance to show off their dramatic abilities and who would have played the roles suggested. Instead of the cast going off behind the scenes to change their clothing I think following his suggestion and having them move around the stage to the music whilst change their appearance would have been good. Each could have had a bag with the necessary items to change their appearance considerably i.e. wigs, moustaches, sunglasses etc. This again means that the audience are party to and entertained by the transformations rather than sitting looking at an empty stage. I think they should have been encourage to ad lib and generally react to Lettice's speeches in a more exaggerated way i.e. yawns, watch checking, scratching, whispering etc and then by the C and D sections becoming very animated; laughing, grinning, nudging each other and even cheering, with a lot more energy. There could have been a lot more reaction to "no doubt it contained hedgehogs", which is the point at which Lettice really starts to depart from the set script and grabs their attention. There was a tendency for them to stand in two straight lines which would not have been possible with a much smaller group. I think the device of addressing the audience as the growing crowd of tourists with Lettice coming forward on the stage and engaging individuals in the audience could have resulted in some audience participation which demonstrated how entertaining and

popular her talks had become. The sitting on the thistle and the camera man worked as good comic devices and lifted things.

All of the scenes between Lettice and Lottie were strong and a believable change in relationships was established. Both actresses were well cast. They had both been well rehearsed and their lines, though presenting an enormous challenge to memory, were secure. It would have been easy for them to flag as the play progressed but they kept up the huge energy levels necessary to create their convincing characterisations. The rather static nature of the interview in Miss Schoen's office in Act one was relieved by Lettice's energetic striding and declaiming and Lotte's occasional rising and posturing.

Act 2 moved through emotions of distrust, gaiety, reminiscence and passion with gentle inebriation along the way and was thoroughly engaging. I was looking forward to the revealing of Lotte's head of grey hair at the end of Act 2 and the tenderness of Lettice's reaction. Maggy's expression of sheer delight; that this woman she had feared had just made herself vulnerable and therefore now capable of becoming a confident and true companion, was so heart-warming and joyous.

Act 3 romped along with surprising revelations and hilariously silly moments. The contrast between Lettice's dramatic retelling of the accident with plenty of embellishment contrasted well with Lotte's desperate desire to avoid becoming a laughing stock. Mr Bardolph was the perfect foil in the midst of the conflicting emotions of the two women and climaxing in his PAM-TITTITI-PAMs, which were like all the best comedy done in complete seriousness.

The play really ended on an upbeat and the audience had been well entertained.

ACTING

MAGGIE GOODALL AS LETTICE DOUFFET

Maggie's portrayal of this complex character was lovely and avoided the Maggie Smith copy cat. Maggie really made this lady an extension of herself and the result was natural and engaging. We sensed her lack of confidence at the start when her audience were bored and her gradual increasing confidence when she let her imagination run wild. I liked the nervous laugh when she was challenged by the surly man. Maggie had a lot to learn and the strain was evident just occasionally when she stumbled over some lines and swallowed a few words at the ends of sentences but as she warmed up and the play proceeded her delivery became fluid and crisp. By the end of the play Maggie had captured the hearts of the audience and many of her lines resulted in explosions of laughter for example her description of using a blackboard and easel as a guillotine. I liked her over the top playing of the executioner complete with West Country accent. I think that Maggie has a real gift for comedy which I witnessed when I saw her in the Farndale Murder Mystery.

IRENE GLYNN AS CHARLOTTE SHOEN

I had previously seen Irene play Mrs Reece in the Farndale Murder Mystery and when she arrived as Lotte in Act 1 with the perfect clipped tones and no-nonsense stance I thought this might be the extent of her range. How wrong I was, here was a really well rounded characterisation. In Act 2 she was smug and condescending in her delight at having found a suitable position for Lettice on the river boat. I really liked the mimicking of the "ghosts" of the office wringing their hands. Similarly the

gruff voice of Lotte's father was good as he described what he called the "Communal Eye", though I wondered if he should have retained a slight German accent. The very impassioned description of the destruction of London's heritage complete with violent gestures and grim facial expressions to punctuate the "bash, bash, bash" were very good. These soliloquies were very spirited. I found the delivery of "He dismantled us as well," moving. A realistic but not overdone stumble due to the strength and quantity of Quaff imbibed was good.

It was Act 3 that really explored a range of emotions in the character. Her doleful look as she entered bandaged about the head and stood in the doorway was perfect. Her whole down-beaten demeanour was amplified by the large cardigan, yellow tie blouse and flat shoes. Her sour expressions as she listened to Lettice and Mr Bardolph from the arm chair prepared us for why she was not happy for Lettice to tell the truth about the accident. As the decision is made to re-enact the execution scene the opportunity for straight-faced delivery of lines to cause a roar of laughter were again presented with, "In a forest, naturally," getting a huge response and also the stiff delivery of lines when her head was on the block. A very sensitive and funny portrayal which I enjoyed a lot.

SILVEY WEBBER AS MISS FRAMER

This was a small part but Silvey did a good job in playing this timid and over-zealous employee who was so nervous of her overbearing boss.

ERIC BECKLEY AS MR BARDOLPH

Eric create a good impact from the off. He looked and sounded the part and had a lovely clear delivery. He conducted his interview as though he was already standing in court. I have already said how funny his drumming was. He ended on a high as well with very good delivery of, "An English woman's home is her scaffold," and his mimicking of the judge's voice. This was a lovely comic cameo and Eric made the most of it.

PETER SCOFIELD AS SURLY MAN

Peter delivered his lines clearly and with some force though I would have loved him to have been a bit more surly and aggressive.

I want to thank you all for an entertaining evening. There was much about this production to commend.

Lynne Wooldridge