

The Titfield Thunderbolt by TEB Clarke and adapted for the stage by Philip Goulding

Ilminster Entertainments Society (IES)
Warehouse Theatre, Ilminster, Somerset
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Introduction

I didn't know The Titfield Thunderbolt at all and enjoyed reading it. The story of a community coming together resonated, given the current climate, and in the doom and gloom that seems to be everywhere it was lovely to read a light-hearted comedy about villagers trying and succeeding to save their local railway line. It also seemed to be one that would present some challenges such as a set complete with the possibility of a steam engine on stage! I was looking forward to seeing it come to life and was far from disappointed. I thoroughly enjoyed the evening, from the warm welcome at the door, receiving our tickets on entering the auditorium (to find the two of us were on different modes of transport!) the play itself and the bar which still managed to retain some of its charm despite the renovations. The whole experience was a joy.

Presentation

It was a pleasant delight to feel like the show had begun from the moment we entered the auditorium. Greeted at the door with our bus and train tickets, the anticipation of what was to come began to build straight away. Our fellow audience members clearly felt the same, as they, tickets in hand, chatted about the possibility of what to expect, and it created a very positive expectant atmosphere from the outset.

The straightforward yet very effective set caught the eye and was used well to create different levels. Attention to detail, such as the use of colour and simple set dressing, contributed to the feel of the time period and effectively made it clear that the play was not set in the modern world.

The division and rotation of the large truck was used very well to transform the stage into the different settings of the vicarage and pub, and pushing unused set to the rear of the stage clearly demarcated where the action was to take place. The scene changes were, for the most part, efficient and mostly maintained the pace particularly when paired with the music. Pairing every change with a musical interlude would have ensured the pace was always maintained; the pace slowed a little during the slightly longer silent changes. Dan's home / railway carriage felt a little incongruous as it looked too much like a home and too little like a railway carriage. I wonder if perhaps more dressing, which Joan could have removed as she repurposed his home to a working carriage while Dan fixed the coupling, may have helped make it clearer what was happening.

The rotating set was used to great effect when we moved to Mallingford station; the 90 degree rotation really created the sensation of being in a completely different station. Very nicely done, as was the arrival of the Titfield Thunderbolt herself! I was particularly looking forward to this star appearance and it was worth the wait. The audience couldn't resist a cheer when she puffed into Mallingford which I imagine was exactly the desired response!

The lighting, despite a hiccup at the start, effectively enhanced the on-stage action. The set was purposefully lit, with warm colours which added to the charm of the station, vicarage and pub. The sections of set not in use for particular scenes drew the eye to action on stage, though this was more clearly demarcated as the play progressed. The use of the house lights for key points and scenes when breaking of the fourth wall was done effectively and did not interrupt the action or break the

flow of the play. The use of different colour was also well used to help differentiate between the interior and exterior scenes.

The sound effects enhanced the key aspects of the performance with volume used to good effect throughout - particularly when Edna opened and closed the train window when speaking with Dan, as he clung haplessly to the door in an attempt to board at speed. We were left in no doubt where we were in each scene and the sound was well used in contributing to this surety.

Direction – Irene Glynn

I think one of the challenges of this charming play is the risk of lapsing into overacting and more than a little melodrama, but this was skilfully avoided here with any moments of melodramatic speechifying used deliberately to add to the comedy of the performance. From the off we were brought into the world of the Titfield residents, drawn in to their sense of pride for and ownership of their railway line and were rooting for their success. The characters of the play are stereotypical in many ways and parallels are easily made with those from the many beloved English comedy television shows that have entertained in recent decades. While inspiration may have been drawn from such shows, nonetheless I felt the Titfield residents in this performance were very much their own characters with charm and eccentricity in equal measure.

From the beginning it was clear that this was a play with a difference and the audience would not be passively watching the action. Of course this is in part due to the script, but it was nicely enhanced in the opening scene. The actors briefly embodying each character they would be playing as they were introduced was a nice touch and added to the sense of anticipation for what was to come; not least that this would be an evening that blended heart warming and fun! Not all of the cast had the greatest of singing talents perhaps, though this added wholeheartedly to the charm of the group and to the sense that these were real people in a real village, despite the fact that it was simultaneously being made clear that this was a theatrical performance. The apparent contradiction was executed skilfully so that it worked very well. The transitions between the scenes which involved the audience and those that didn't were well executed and the play didn't fracture as a result, staying as a cohesive piece throughout. The auditorium was used for entrances and exits to good effect and the movement of the train in the early scenes was well portrayed by the swaying and movements of the actors on stage. The bus and train 'race' with the audience having their tickets at the ready was also nicely executed with the set clearly separating the two vehicles. I did wonder if perhaps having the cast disembark the vehicles to speak to one another when the train was halted by the steam roller may have been better than having them appearing to be having a conversation from 'inside' each one.

The pace was consistent throughout and, as the play progressed, the comedy elements refined more and more - particularly in the second half when the dual roles the actors were playing were alluded to with more obvious nods and looks to the audience. These were more subtle in the first half but the more obvious allusions in the second half drew a greater response from the audience and perhaps it would have been even more effective had this approach been taken throughout.

There was an element of warmth established from the outset which was consistent throughout. The comic elements were well drawn out. Attention to other details enhanced the comedy: from the on-stage cast creating the animal noises as Edna barged her way to the station, to the hallelujah chorus when financial backing was secured, to the spray of water over the auditorium when Vernon another of his dastardly plans into action; each added another layer to delight and entertain.

Acting

Some general points for all the actors. This was delightful and each role had its own distinct character, especially those played by the same actor. We had a little taste of the change of characters by the same actor in the opening scene and the switch was nicely done and indicated that this was not one character in a different costume, but that we could expect and were indeed presented with, different characters altogether. This made it thoroughly entertaining and added to the light-hearted atmosphere. A challenge of comedy is the audience response and this being different every show. Finding the balance between maintaining pace and allowing for laughter is tricky and some lines were unfortunately lost under the laughter of the audience. Though it's a good sign; your audience was with you all the way and responding in the way I'm sure you hoped they would! Nonetheless, this is a minor point in what were terrific performances from all. Well done!

Mr Clifton / Miss Coggett played by Yvonne McGuinness

These characters had shorter stage time but your performance ensured they were no less memorable for it. Mr Clifton was simultaneously dour and somehow a bit dotty too. His moustache was a bit distracting yet somehow added to his quiriness. He knew his job and wasn't having any nonsense about it.

Miss Coggett was a lovely contrast and very well played. The audience were left in no doubt that she was an imposter designed to derail (pun intended!) the villagers' plans long before she was 'outed' as such. The Welsh accent was appropriately dropped in places, though perhaps it was a little too good to be believable for Miss Coggett? Nevertheless, these were important if smaller roles and they were well played.

Mr Blakeworth / Rev'd Sam Weech played by John McGrouther

It's tricky to play two characters that could easily be portrayed in very similar ways. However you avoided this trap nicely with your portrayal of the train enthusiast Weech, almost childlike in his delight at the thought of driving the train, and the officious Blakeworth.

Stuffy and officious, yet quite likeable in his insisting that the train wait for Edna and shirking his duties to sneak in a round of golf, Mr Blakeworth was a character that could easily be played two dimensionally. This wasn't the case in your performance as you adeptly drew out and highlighted both sides of his character and, for example, when Edna spoke of his limited usefulness in saving the railway line, comments from other characters matched neatly with the Blakeworth we had already seen.

Rev'd Weech contrasted well and it was easy to believe that we had an entirely different person in front of us; you made it very easy to forget that the same actor was playing both roles. His obvious care and affection for his niece and his excitement at being a train driver were a nice contrast to the seriousness with which he took his duties as the vicar. Indeed his nervousness when the experiences of the new adventure challenged his morals showed a depth of character which gave a richness to the role that could easily be lost.

Dan Taylor / Mr Ruddock played by Ken Steed

I thoroughly enjoyed your portrayal of the rough-around-the-edges bit of a scoundrel Dan Taylor. Suitably grouchy and gruff, this wasn't overdone which ensured he was still very likeable

throughout. You seemed to settle more into the character as the play progressed and the scene when you tried to board the train at speed was excellently played... I could almost see the train window materialise around you!

Mr Ruddock was a lovely contrast and it was easy to believe that he was being played by a different actor. He was suitably stern and official which differed nicely from his behaviour around Miss Coggett. Peering over the tops of his glasses to reprimand or to reinforce a point was a nice touch. The costume was a little ill fitting with the hems of the trousers falling down which I assume was deliberate as it added nicely to the impression of a minister who is a little harassed and busy with little time or attention, or indeed any interest, to give to his personal appearance.

Vernon Crump / Mr Clegg played by Neil Morgan

You mention in the programme that Del Boy and Boycie inspired your portrayal of Vernon Crump and this was apparent from the off. However, as Act I progressed you seemed to settle into the role and Crump became less 'Only Fools and Horses' and more a unique character in his own right. Fiendish enough for us not to believe his offer of a truce for a moment and not to pity his arrest, yet not too dastardly to detract from the light-hearted feel of the play, I felt this was a balanced portrayal of the villain of the piece. Like many of the characters in the play, this is one role that would be all too easy to play almost cartoonish and superficial. Your portrayal avoided this while ensuring the audience knew that his character arc was limited in that he had few if any redeemable characteristics.

Mr Clegg... what a moustache! This should have been a bit silly and might have detracted from the action but I don't think it did! Instead it occurred at a point where the comedy had built up to the point that the moustache fit in at just the right time. He was suitably nit-picky and unlikeable, so the trickery that avoided him realising the issue with the coupling seemed fair and just.

Harry Crump / Sgt Wilson played by Ben Overd

You played both of these roles nicely though there wasn't an awful lot of difference between the two. Perhaps this was deliberate in order for both men to catch Joan's eye?

Harry was clearly torn between helping his dad and trying to stay on the straight and narrow and you portrayed this well, though less of a reliance on the script to portray this indecision could have enhanced the performance further. Harry's frustration with being unable to attract Joan's attention was well portrayed as was his sense of determination to succeed in his new business.

Sgt Wilson wasn't a particularly large role but he definitely left an impression and you seemed to find your comic timing more comfortably in this role. It was more obvious that Wilson had taken a shine to Joan and the subtle nods to the fact that Vernon couldn't be arrested by Wilson and see his son were nicely played.

Lady Edna Chesterford played by Maggy Goodall

Lady Edna was portrayed with great determination; we were left in no doubt that she wasn't going to take no for an answer when it came to saving the railway line! You portrayed her as a formidable opponent for Vernon's skulduggery and her ardent resolve for saving the railway line was established early and maintained throughout. Her impassioned speeches were nicely done though perhaps could have been more stirring, edging into the melodramatic, particularly the final one

which was largely ignored by the other characters who had clearly become used to, if not a little bored by, her speechifying. I wonder if these speeches could also have been spoken a little slower as there was a little tripping over words at times. Nonetheless, this was a portrayal of a loveable woman not afraid to put her money – or rather her hunting and fishing rights – where her mouth was in order to save the railway, and throughout she was portrayed as a woman of action and not just words. She was easy to like and while there was a real feeling of triumph for village by the end, this feeling was also there specifically for Edna, and your performance was largely the reason for this.

Joan Weech played by Kayleigh Storey

Joan was well played as a no nonsense, practical and feisty young woman, not afraid to speak her mind nor take control of a situation as it was demanded. Her reciprocal liking for Harry wasn't as obvious and the marriage agreement at the end seemed more of a business arrangement rather than her excuse to reveal that she actually felt the same way about Harry as he did about her. Had she been more flustered at those times when he was mentioned in her presence throughout the play this might have helped make her hidden feelings more obvious. Nonetheless, you portrayed her very well as sensible, reliable and very likeable which was a nice contrast to the slightly more eccentric characters around her.

Mr Valentine / Mrs Bottomley played by Vernon Dunkley

I can't decide who I liked more... but I think it may be Mrs Bottomley! I'll come to her in a moment.

Valentine is a loveable sot, generous and harmless but seemingly largely ineffectual until given a purpose, and your portrayal implied this backstory and built on it very well. Drunkenness can often overplayed and unrealistic on stage but you reigned this in and the performance was nicely convincing. As a result there was room to show his character beyond the booze which left room for a character arc as the play progressed. The portrayal of an increasingly sober Valentine was also nicely done and you didn't lose any of his charm as he sobered up.

I loved Mrs Bottomley, even (especially?!) her moustache! This was very nicely played without lapsing into a pantomime-esque portrayal. She was funny and comedic and it was easy to imagine her canoodling with Valentine in the bar, despite the same actor portraying them both! Her appearance was brief but very definitely memorable.

Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed this. I giggled throughout and, while not a huge fan of audience participation, felt this aspect was well balanced, wasn't overwhelming and it didn't detract from either the play or my enjoyment of it. There was clearly a lot of thought and effort put into the show and it goes to show that rehearsal schedules will take as long as the time they're given. This may have been a shorter than usual schedule for the company, but it certainly didn't detract from the show as far as I was concerned. Thank you for inviting me and for a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Niamh McGrogan.

Somerset Fellowship of Drama – Phoebe Rees Competition