

THE BOY WHO FELL INTO A BOOK

by Alan Ayckbourn

IES, The Warehouse Theatre - Friday 23rd May 2014

THE PLAY

I must confess that when I read the script prior to seeing this production I didn't know quite what to make of it! I see that it was written to mark the 1999 National Year of Reading, so it makes sense that it celebrates the adventures of a boy 'lost' in a random series of books from the shelf beside his bed; great idea!

It appears to be written for children, but it seems to me that the books it references are seen from an adult perspective and, apart from that well-worn running gag about getting Kevin's name wrong, that almost all the humour is ironic and presumably aimed at entertaining reasonably well-read Mums and Dads. Assuming that the target audience was around middle-school age, would their children 'get it' I wondered, and if not would there be enough action and/or spectacle to keep them interested?

Kevin is a great character to identify with of course, but Rockfist Slim seemed awfully hackneyed as a Mike Hammer-type gumshoe, and Monique the baddie very under-written. As for the characters they meet on their journey – I thought the chess section was a bit erudite, I doubted whether the snippet from Kidnapped would ring any bells with today's audience, and I thought they might dismiss the Wooblies as too babyish... which leaves Little Red Riding Hood and the Headless Monk!

Forgive me; it is not my job to critique the script but rather to try and understand the challenges, and unless you have an enormous budget for set and costume in order to create spectacle, I think your biggest challenge is to make this play flow from scene to scene and to make it entertaining. I could find no reference to any other amateur society taking it on, apart from a Youth Group in Dover some 10 years ago, and I suspect this might be because others have recognised the difficulties it poses.

I understand from Anna B that this will be Rachel Lawrence's debut as a director, so it is a particularly ambitious choice for IES to take on, and in the week *before* half-term! I am wondering where you will get your audience from...

Anyway, despite my reservations about the script, I am greatly looking forward to seeing what you do with it.

THE PRODUCTION

The Warehouse was respectably full on the Friday night when I came, but most of the heads I could see were grey (like mine) and I counted only a handful of children. I'm hoping they came in their droves on Saturday?

When the tabs opened we saw only a nice clean black box, with Kevin reading in bed stage R – very nicely lit. There was part of a chess-board painted onto the stage floor and occupying most of stage L and clearly this was going to be a constant throughout, but this worked perfectly well I thought. The rest of the set was obviously behind the back travellers and I think I shall break with my own tradition and cover both presentation and direction at the same time, since this play was a journey.

I loved the simplicity of Kevin's bedroom, with the book shelves just upstage of him but within easy reach, and I thought the opening was really well handled. Excellent clear voice from Daniel as he read aloud and very naturally from Rockfist Slim and the Green Shark - breaking off to illustrate all the impact words. Lovely! - it got us laughing, and the Dad / bedside light interaction was beautifully timed. I was a bit surprised however that he put the book on top of a pile of what looked like three or four on the top shelf - surely, I thought, there should have been five, standing upright, to which he would add his 6th, and that this might have been pointed a bit more - possibly even with a ray of moonlight picking them out in the darkness? The tumble out of bed seemed a bit contrived and I half-wondered whether you might have managed to suspend Kevin in the darkness while you removed the truck, so that he could genuinely "fall forward into the book". Incidentally the truck was very neatly done, with the rigid black 'legs' hinged to let it through, but carpet squares rather than castors underneath would have made this almost silent and so much more magical. You did use carpet later on for the table and chairs truck in the House of Shaws, very effectively.

I had expected Rockfist Slim's introduction to be lit from his Zippo (obviously with support, possibly from a follow-spot?) but as far as I could see the lighter wasn't practical and I wondered whether this was a Health & Safety issue, though I could really see this being a fire-hazard! However Marck's grizzled gum-shoe character was quickly established and was clearly going to be a treat, though a just-discernible hesitancy with lines did slightly reduce the pace of all that snappy and amusing repartee. The dull clang when he rushes the door off-stage R was just right - nice, and I thought you were wise to leave Kevin's chimney-climbing to our imagination off L. Opening the travellers to reveal that up-stage composite structure - currently a roof-top, worked really well, and I thought their escape was nicely done, though the gunfire could have been a lot louder and more convincing as a sound-effect.

Then we met Monique and her henchman Brunt and to be honest I thought the stage-fighting could have done with a bit more rehearsal. Very difficult to do this safely but convincingly - one possible solution might be to put it into slow motion and make a lot more of it, though of course you had to fit dialogue in as well. Tricky.

Next we were into the chess game and I was delighted to find that this worked so much better than I had envisaged - the Shakespearean style came over well, really nice red and cream costumes, the laugh lines were well taken and seeing it played out on a board was fascinating. I don't know what the youngsters in the audience made of it, but I really enjoyed this - one of the high spots as far as I was concerned.

The perambulation round the auditorium was a clever idea to cover the next scene change and as a result the "we could be walking in circles" line got a great laugh! However the Red Riding Hood section which followed worked less well for me - not enough pace and the speaking in rhyming couplets seemed rather clunky, though possibly this was in the writing. It was difficult also to see the wolf as a figure of fun and as potentially dangerous at the same time.

A very quick change for Maddie from Monique to Jennet and this short scene before the interval didn't come over very strongly - I wondered whether there

was a reason why Colleen hadn't played this character since she would certainly have had more time to get into it.

You set up the House of Shaws very neatly during the action of the first scene after the interval but I did wonder whether you could have used the auditorium with the tabs closed to represent the front door, rather than having Mick as Ebenezer in that central tower upstage – impressive though it was! Nice little scene of quickfire cue-bite upstage of the table – it worked very well, and was the sort of rat-a-tat-tat pace which I had hoped for elsewhere in the play. The scene on the stairs lost a bit of momentum (largely because there was so much more dialogue than climbing!) but Kevin's near-fall at the top was well engineered. We had excellent wind sound effects in this scene but the gun-fire off L again was disappointing – I think there might have been a case for firing a starting pistol in the wings (if you could still find one...) to give this more shock value. Something did fly off the table though – nicely timed, but very small (it looked like a cornflake to me!).

I was amazed to see that you had managed to remove all evidence of the House of Shaws behind the travellers during this scene and had created, as if by magic, that amazingly colourful Woobly world, with painted on versions of other Woobly books on the back-drop (loved the sense of humour here, especially 50 Shades Of...). The script suggests that the narrator should be a disembodied voice, possibly over the speaker system – Teletubbie-style – but you had given the job to Colleen sitting upstage between the two mushrooms, and I thought this worked really well! I liked the primary-coloured costumes and the face-painting for the Woobly family, and the big bowls of jelly – though I was a bit disappointed that you had abandoned the idea of the jelly fight. Possibly it would have been just too messy! Waiting for the family to respond with their 'woobly comments' slowed it all down a lot and I think a lot more cue-bite would have helped here. Interestingly I got a vague sense of menace from these apparently innocuous characters, and I'm sure this is what the author intended. It felt like something out of Dr Who – clever stuff!

After a bit of a pause the final story was of course the Book of Ghost Stories and generating an effective atmosphere for this, especially after the colour and gaiety of the previous scene was always going to be difficult, though the smoke machine helped. I think eerie music or something could have been used to cover the hiatus and get us into the mood; in fact I think there might have been room for quite a bit more use of linking music to promote flow throughout the production. However Marck's falling "into the well" was extremely bravely done and the echo-effect on his voice was splendid, as was the Headless Monk – a lovely piece of work, and well positioned on that raised platform upstage. Bravo.

Then we were back in Kevin's room, with the evil Monique, and as far as I remember you left the bed in place for the final scene where Rockfist is hauled up from the well (nicely done) and they say their goodbyes., with the final scene of Kevin back in bed to round it all off very satisfactorily.

Acting

I think the success of this production, as is so often the case, was also due in large part to your inspired casting of its two main protagonists and some very good cameo performances amongst the ensemble, all of whom played several roles – more than planned I understand, since Matt Haines had to drop out a week or

two before. Clearly Mick Glynn and Kevin Fairburn (I would think) leapt into the breach and did extremely well under the circumstances. Though Alan Ayckbourn managed with six in total in Scarborough, I thought it was probably much better to have eight (or nine as you originally intended) – much more appropriate for an amateur group, and an opportunity to use additional younger actors.

Daniel Fowler - Kevin

This was a terrific performance, Daniel! I'm sure you got lots and lots of plaudits from friends and family in the audience, as well as the rest of the team, and I'm so glad that you took your own warm applause from The Warehouse audience. It was such a pleasure to see such a relative youngster performing with such confidence and composure, and in particular that you have already learned the importance of speaking clearly and not gabbling your lines (as so many of your peers do on stage, unfortunately). You played Kevin with a really good natural style and most of the time you seemed totally at ease, and very much in tune with Marck. You worked so well together, and I could believe in their unlikely partnership. Occasionally, especially in the second half, I noticed a tendency to walk restlessly backwards and forwards around a spot rather than planting yourself comfortably on it, and I wondered whether this was an unconscious attempt to relieve tension during bits you didn't feel entirely sure of. You might look out for this if you made a video, as I really hope you did. Fortunately however you have very 'good hands' and never overused them in unnecessary gesture – another common weakness amongst your peers. Just one word of advice for the future – try to 'feel' emotion rather than trying to 'show it'. Once or twice I saw you *acting*, rather than just *being* Kevin, and it weakened the performance just for a moment. Excellent work though – I really liked it!

Marck Pearlstone – Rockfist Slim

This was another great piece of casting and I'm sure you really enjoyed playing this scruffy, grizzled, incompetent gumshoe-type with a snappy Bronx accent and plenty of attitude. Excellent stage presence and looked just right with the fedora, rumpled shirt and Columbo-style mac. Rockfist had an enormous number of funny lines, and you really made the most of them with lovely timing, drawing I'm sure on years and years of experience. My only concern was with security of the words – I don't think you took a prompt at any stage, but I was aware of a very slight hesitancy at times which seemed to suggest that you hadn't been completely off-script quite long enough, and which robbed some of your exchanges of the quickfire pace which the role demanded. Your work with Daniel was really good and it must have been a fantastic experience for him to have the opportunity to act with you. Great fun all round.

Maddie Lowe – Monique/Jennet/Mummy Woobly

To be honest I don't think 'femme fatale' is quite up your street, Maddie. The part isn't very well written in my opinion, but certainly needs extravagant over-acting, with more than a touch of melodrama! I also think that a dark coloured top and skirt didn't really work since she is seen against a black background almost all the time – perhaps something long and silky, maybe in vivid green (since it turns out rather improbably at the end that she is after all the Green Shark herself), scarlet lipstick and long red nails, sexy French accent – the whole OTT bit. Funnily enough I think I saw more quiet menace in your Mummy Woobly than in Monique's slightly embarrassed half-smile. I felt for you...

Mick Glynn – Brunt/Red Gareth/Grandmother/Ebenezer

Brunt was little more than a cough and a spit, but I really liked your impassive and rather threatening Red Gareth on the chessboard – lots of malign presence from this man of very few words. Grandmother wasn't terribly well defined – I didn't see any of the hungry wolf under that cuddly, bumbling exterior. The role of Ebenezer however, which you took at short notice, suited better and I really liked the section where the broad Scottish accent met Bronx and it turned out to be a draw! I suspect you were also the Headless Monk, but it wasn't easy to tell.

Kevin Fairburn – White Pawn/Red Bishop/Rumplestiltskin/Daddy Woobly
Good work in all these small roles – neatly polished performances.

Colleen McMahon – White Queen/Narrator

I very much enjoyed both these roles, Colleen – regal power and dignity as the White Queen, with a nice sense of humour (loved the 'Honiton'), and the Narrator for the Woobly scene was done completely straight but with just a subtle glimpse of ironic mockery which worked really well. Nice work.

Bryony Haslock – Little Red Riding Hood

Nice clear voice and good stage presence – well done!

Charlotte Foster – Baby Woobly

I believe I have adjudicated you and Bryony before, Charlotte – in *A Christmas Carol* before Christmas. A much smaller role for you this time, as the baby of the Woobly family, and not a lot of dialogue to learn, but it looked as though it was great fun to do!

SUMMARY

In summary I think you all did an amazing job of bringing this difficult piece of work to life on stage. Presentation, especially in terms of set design, costume, special effects and lighting were of a good standard, and though I had concerns about the recorded gunfire, in general I thought SFX were used very well. On the direction side, though there were large chunks which felt a bit under-paced (and of necessity the whole thing was rather episodic), I salute you Rachel for such simple but imaginative staging, for really effective casting, and for managing to make the play so much more entertaining than I had expected.

Reading the script again now, with your production of it in my mind, I feel a great deal more warmly towards it than I did first time round.

Congratulations, and thank you so much for inviting me to adjudicate!

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