

## WHEN WE ARE MARRIED

by J B Priestley

IES – Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2016

### THE PLAY

I have a soft spot for this lovely play, mainly because West Huntspill's production of it in September 1993 was one of the first I saw in my new role as Moderator for the Phoebe Rees, and I remember studying the script closely, though my notes for it (probably hand-written at the time!) have long-since disappeared.

A curious thing about it is, though written in 1938, it is set 30 years earlier. Priestley used the same device several years later when he wrote *An Inspector Calls*, presumably so as to make his savage attack on what he saw as Britain's moral decline between the wars (and in particular the hypocrisy of the middle classes) a little more acceptable to audiences. In the case of *When We Are Married* however, in which he pokes fun at the pomposity of the Edwardian nouveau riche, his style is much more affectionate, though clearly influenced by his early years in Bradford.

I have heard the play described as a farce, and it is certainly very funny, but I think social comedy describes it much better. It is beautifully constructed, with three acts of almost equal length, and each ends with a very big laugh of delight. I don't think there is any possibility of splitting the play in half, as is often done with old 3 act plays nowadays, so perhaps you will have two intervals? The nice thing from an amateur theatre perspective is that there are plenty of really good characters (14 roles in all), with a single set and a blessed conjunction of the three theatre unities – time/place/theme, so only one costume each.

So - no special challenges, except those of creating a really good period atmosphere and of extracting as much humour as possible while remaining true to the style of the play. I am greatly looking forward to watching it again after all these years, and to see what IES have done with it.

### PRESENTATION

No front tabs, so we were able to feast our eyes on your excellent set before the lights went down at the start of the play. What a triumph it was! Very soundly constructed, so not a quiver when the doors opened and closed (those glazed pictures would have given it away had there been the slightest movement – very brave!), and nicely laid out. It looked very much the sort of room the author described, and was beautifully appointed with a nice big central rug and red 'flock' wallpaper above the dado rail and up to the picture rail, and toning red panelling below. I loved the fact that you had used real wood mouldings – skirting/architrave etc, and that you had taken the trouble to hang those double doors at the back so well that they closed perfectly. A somewhat anachronistic ball-catch admittedly, but lovely gleaming brass door furniture which looked

splendid. You'd also used a really nice colour for all the wood – including the French windows to the conservatory I noticed. Emulsion is of course the only practical finish for sets, but I did wonder whether you'd considered just a lick of water-based varnish to lift the colour? A counsel of perfection perhaps – as would be some cling-film on the back of the French windows to give a gleam when the doors were opened and closed.

The set dressing too was of a very high standard – lovely button-back chairs with red plush, and matching drapes, a very period-looking low sofa stage L and a day-bed to balance it on the other side, and lots of small tables, dressers etc. I particularly liked the drop-leaf card-table which Ruby so expertly handled. Also lots of knick-knacks, a lovely firescreen and lace around the mantelpiece, a really good range of suitable pictures and – a wonderful touch – a portrait of Alderman Halliwell on the chimneybreast! There is no one credited in the programme for painting this, nor indeed for all the elements in the set dressing – including several plants which I would think were real (and, I assume, taken out into the light each day!). I expect it was a team effort – and I salute you all.

Sound and lighting were in Brian Perkins' capable hands as usual and he made a good job of them with appropriate music at a nice level, a very credible telephone effect off-stage L and extremely accurately-timed lighting changes. I'm assuming the other sounds we heard – plate smashing, Ormonroyd crashing into things, knocking from above etc, were all live. I liked the lighting of the hall beyond the double doors, and the two levels for the conservatory – evening and night. The night I came we had additional sound effects in terms of real thunder overhead and heavy rain on the roof, and what I think we assumed were lightning flashes which caused the stage lights to flicker occasionally, and the houselights to come on briefly at one stage – very exciting!

Costume, for which Kate White is credited, was very good. In particular clothes fitted really well – trousers were just the right length for instance, and the hems on the skirts of the three wives were perfect. I thought it was a really good idea to put the three husbands in white tie and tails (JBP says "dressed in their best" I see), since you really can't go wrong with evening dress and well polished black lace-ups. Both Gerald and Fred wore their suit jackets fully buttoned up, as was the fashion I believe, and looked suitably 'period', though I think detachable starched collars would have been even more helpful. And Lottie looked so tartily 'right' – well done.

Props were excellent. I don't know what you used to simulate port (strong Ribena?) but it looked exactly right, as did the bottle it was poured from. In fact initially I assumed it *was* port but the amount the actors consumed made this unlikely! Similarly the whisky looked just the right colour in its decanter and though you had taken the trouble to get a nice old-fashioned siphon, presumably you couldn't get gas cartridges to fit so everyone knocked it back neat! Nice to see real cigars used, the camera and flash tin looked authentic, and the silver framed photos worked nicely. Marriage certificate too. Sue Ainscough is credited with properties and she did a great job I thought.

No wigs as far as I could tell, but all three wives had put their hair up and this looked fine. Often preferable I reckon. The husbands all had suitable haircuts too

and I was impressed to see that Patrick had started to grow mutton-chops whiskers for the role – just discernible from row D! I expected Ormonroyd to wear a large drooping moustache as described, but maybe you were concerned it would affect vocal clarity. Make-up was all just as it should be (rather obvious of course for Lottie) and I was amused to see that Mrs Northrop's nose grew redder as the play progressed! 13

All in all I think the production standards here were top-notch, and I congratulate everyone who went the extra mile to make sure of this. Very impressive all round.

## PRODUCTION

I tend to judge the quality of the direction in any particular production according to three simple criteria:

- i) Did the piece engage and hold my interest throughout?
- ii) Did the director 'add value' to the script?
- iii) Did it show?

The answer to the first two questions should of course be a resounding YES, as it was here. The play is undoubtedly very well written, and IES are fortunate in being able to attract a terrific cast, but this in itself isn't enough to guarantee it is going to reach its full potential. It needs someone to pull it all together and create satisfying stage pictures, to imbue it with that variety of pace which will hold our attention, and to explore to the full the author's perceived intentions. And in Lyn Lockyer you had a really able and experienced director who knows how to do this all day long! I had wondered whether there would be an interval between the 1st and 2nd acts but when we got to this point I'm sure I wasn't alone in thinking "gosh, here already?" and in being completely enthralled in the story; anxious to see what would happen next! I loved the way she used the whole acting area with very natural and well-motivated moves, not afraid to hold a picture for a while, but ready to change it long before it became wearisome. And the same was true of the pace – plenty of energy and excellent cue-bite, but it never seemed contrived or rushed, and she knew exactly how to make or underline a point with a nicely judged pause. We laughed a great deal because, with her help, you all mined JBP's script so successfully to extract the comedy which lay within.

Just a word about Anna's 'dry' on Saturday night. She obviously knew her lines perfectly well and this was simply a moment's lapse of concentration, but she handled it with remarkable panache and, in Ruby's voice, asked "Mrs Prompt" what her next line was. It was done with such confidence that we scarcely noticed anything was amiss and I felt certain, thinking about it afterwards, that this had been the way Lyn had suggested, and presumably you had all agreed, that you would handle the problem if it arose. Unfortunately Celia was caught as unawares as we were and didn't respond, so Anna asked again and this time Chris, beside her on stage, gave her the cue. The audience were so much "on-side" by now that it didn't bother them at all, and indeed they roared their approval. A great, and memorable, moment in amateur theatre!

And as for the question of adding value? – well, you need to study the script to know how much, but time and again I was aware of a grouping or a gesture or a move which added highlights and which I suspected wasn't scripted. Examples? Well – the wonderfully funny ensemble work from the three husbands, for instance, in their volte face in the scene where Gerald turns the tables; the lovely illustrative hand movements which Ruby used when reciting her 'party piece' for Ormonroyd... charming, and done so naturally; Ormonroyd himself leaning forward with the cigar in his mouth, drunkenly trying (and failing) to judge the distance to Ruby's match – a gorgeous moment, which raised a really good laugh, as well as neatly solving the problem of trying to avoid yet more smoking! I could go on and on. Incidentally, I wondered how you would resolve the question of Helliwell's cigar and, later, Gerald's insolently slow lighting of his cigarette. I'm sure many would have ducked it somehow, or used e-cigs, but I was pleased to see that you didn't. It was really odd though – seeing him light up, and smelling the smoke drifting into the auditorium. A rare experience nowadays.

But "did it show"? Well, I've seen a quite a few productions over the years where the direction has been, frankly, a bit ostentatious and feeling irritated about this has detracted from my enjoyment and appreciation of the piece. So I think the answer to this question should be NO. In fact I have reread the whole play this morning in the light of what I saw last night, and can only marvel at how much quietly confident directorial input had been required (this author certainly isn't as prescriptive as some), confirming of course that Lyn's role was pivotal in ensuring that the whole thing worked so well. We loved it!

## PERFORMANCES

I understand that you put this production together in just 6 weeks, but it showed no signs of being under-rehearsed; everyone seemed completely secure with their lines and comfortable with their characters. The three couples, in particular, were extremely well cast – perhaps a little older than JBP had intended (!), but very nicely matched and they worked exceptionally well together.

### Ruby Birtle – Anna Griffiths

This was a lovely cheeky performance which we enjoyed a lot. Good clear voice and excellent presence on stage, but possibly a bit too 'knowing' at times I felt. A little more naivety would have made her even more amusing. Your confidence was terrific, and carried you through that momentary lapse of concentration without faltering because you remained so nicely in character. Very well done!

### Gerald Forbes – Chris Williamson

I thought you made a nice job of this supporting role. The sub-plot relationship with Nancy was entirely credible and your stage experience stood you in good stead when Gerald stood up for himself against those three forceful men. In particular I loved the well-held pause while he casually lit his cigarette and they fumed. Good work.

Mrs Northrop – Jane Leakey

Most enjoyable – you physicalised her extremely well, and drew out a great deal of humour from her laconic delivery, even though the pace suffered a little I thought. Good doe-eyed work with Rev Mercer. The audience loved it, and you got a tremendous round of applause on your exit – always a sign of a successful cameo performance!

Nancy Holmes – Olivia Pangraz

Well done – you described Nancy as ‘giggly’ in the programme and indeed she was very sweet and charming, exactly as required. IES are very fortunate to have you joining their team. Work on cue-bite and on varying the pace of your delivery in your next role – of which there will be many more, I’m sure.

Fred Dyson – David Levi

Not a very demanding role – as far as I remember just a page or so of dialogue in each act – but I’m sure you had fun with it. I did wonder whether you might have made a bit more of the heavy-handed hint ref drinks and cigars in Act 2, which the wives of course missed completely, being wrapped up in their own troubles!

Henry Ormonroyd – Mick Glynn

This is a peach of a part, and you played it really well I thought. A nicely restrained performance on your first entrance, though already with a subtle hint of ‘beeriness’, and the sustained drunkenness we saw in Act 2, carried through into Act 3, was masterfully done and with lovely comic timing. Easy to overdo “falling down drunk” but I thought you rode it very nicely, with excellent vocal range and surprising clarity, despite the slurring. Bravo!

The Husbands

What a joy to have three such able and experienced actors working together so well – the ensemble work was a delight to watch!

Helliwell – Patrick Knox

Great stage presence, creating a confident, urbane, successful man who clearly took for granted the power conferred by his job as an alderman on the Council. Your ability to show this deflating – firstly when confronted by Gerald’s revelation and then by Maria’s reaction to Lottie’s appearance – was so nicely judged. I greatly enjoyed this performance – thank you.

Parker – Dave Goodall

You had a lot of fun with this, and you did it beautifully! I loved the ‘small man’ personality you gave him – physically not at all the “tall, thin man” JBP describes in the stage directions - but actually I think it worked perfectly the way you played him, and was not only very funny but also totally credible throughout. Congratulations!

### Soppit – Ken Steed

This must have been a dream to play; the rather less self-confident (and therefore much more reasonable) of the three, unfortunate enough to be married to a harridan. What joy it was when the hen-pecked worm finally turned! I wanted to cheer... Well done on a super performance.

### The Wives

Like the husbands, the wives worked really well as a team and generated a lot of sympathetic laughter with their ensemble playing.

### Maria – Jo Neagle

We got the impression that, like her husband, Maria Helliwell felt very comfortable with her position in life and this showed clearly in the way you physicalised her; she moved around in such a stately, commanding way. You also had a scarily frosty look when needed, as we saw in her reaction to the revelation about Lottie – I thought the way this was handled by all three of you (Helliwell, Lottie and Maria) was quite delicious! Very good work.

### Annie – Irene Glynn

I loved the way she broke free after a lifetime of putting up with Albert's almost insufferable pomposity – it was suppressed superbly in Act 1 but when she gave vent to her frustration I'm sure there were many in the audience who were urging her on. What fun!

### Clara – Felicity Forrester

Gave, and got in return, the most enormous slap! Both of you really went for it which was extremely brave, but so effective... There was quite a gasp around me. A really good performance all round, I thought, because the nagging was pitched really well, and the retreat was very nicely judged. Bravo.

### Lottie Grady – Maggy Goodall

A long wait for you – until just before the interval - but what an entrance! Looked every inch the trollop and made the most of the sensation she caused. Very nice warmth with Henry, and it was good to hear you sing – even if there was no piano to play. Good work.

### Rev Clement Mercer – Mike Leach

A nice little role right at the end - perhaps not a lot to get your teeth into but what you did was well worthwhile, and we enjoyed the surprising hold he had over the otherwise doughy Mrs N.

### SUMMARY

This was such a success! A very good play, tried and tested, and obviously very popular with your Ilminster audience (full houses every night I gather) which

you presented really well and which was directed and acted with great skill and commitment.

As a result it reached just the sort of level of achievement we love to see in amateur theatre! Congratulations to all concerned.

Thank you so much for your hospitality and for inviting me to come and adjudicate.

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PS: If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please don't hesitate to let me know.