

FAHETGDS 'MURDER MYSTERY'

by David McGillivray and Walter Zeplin Jnr

Iminster Entertainments Soc – Wednesday 11th December 2014

THE PLAY

I like spoofs as a rule – I remember rocking in helpless laughter the first time I saw an Inspector Drake mystery, and I loved directing *Noises Off* – but I do have some serious reservations about the Farndale Ladies series. The authors started brilliantly with 'Macbeth', which is hugely enjoyable and took the Edinburgh Fringe by storm when it first came out in the late 70s, and they followed it up with this one (before going on to write 8 more!). I've read 'Macbeth' and have seen 'Murder Mystery' and 'Christmas Carol' done before. They seem to be the ones most often performed by amateur groups; the others appear to have drifted into obscurity...

The strength of the 'Farndale Macbeth' is that we can delight in watching these hapless ladies making a complete mess of a great play, and one which is pretty well guaranteed to be recognisable to most people in the audience. In fact we as a Club read it shortly after our own production of 'the Scottish play', so we chortled with glee because the delightfully bungled scenes and hopelessly mangled speeches were so well known to us.

The weakness of 'Murder Mystery' on the other hand, in my opinion anyway, is that the play they are lampooning is so terrible that I think there is a danger that audiences will be confused – are we laughing because they are sending up the genre (as represented by the truly awful *Murder At Checkmate Manor*)? Or are we laughing because the Farndale ladies are so abysmally bad – representing the very worst imaginable am-dram? Obviously a bit of both, but whilst their 'Macbeth' seemed to me to be novel and inventive, this one reads as derivative and a bit desperate. In his foreword David McGillivray admits that they were never entirely happy with it and (I note) it was subjected to a number of rewrites.

One thing is for certain anyway: this sort of thing is MUCH more difficult than it looks! Your director has to be very skilled in maintaining our interest by setting a cracking pace, keeping the stage business very slick, and mining for laughs at every possible opportunity, so that we can forget what rubbish it all is while we roar our approval. The actors on the other hand have to play their roles with grim determination - heroic failures who are completely unaware of being funny. If they ever drop this mask then I think the laughter will die.

There are some bear-traps too; the set falling apart at the start needs very clever 'choreography' in order to make any impact, the prologue can seem unbearably long unless the actress playing Phoebe Reece (sic) has a great sense of comedy, and in particular the Fashion Parade can fall awfully flat. The quiz too can be excruciating unless your audience are whole-heartedly with you.

Fortunately IES know what they are doing, and I take comfort from the fact that Dave Goodall has a great deal of experience. I look forward to an evening of uproarious and carefree laughter. Anything less could be a disaster...

PRESENTATION

From the moment I saw Maggie (as Thelma) in her Miss Farndale sash, giving out quiz slips to the audience as they came in, I felt reassured – a good start. No date on the sash, as far as I remember, which seemed sensible – there's no reason why this shouldn't be a current production. I liked the programme too – someone had had a lot of fun with the FAHETGDS end of it, and I noted with approval that the IES end made mention of the SFD and your Phoebe Rees entry – thank you.

And when the front tabs opened I thought you/they had made a surprisingly good job of the set! It was very much as suggested in the back of the script and worked fine. The only real difference that I could see was that you were using the theatre's projector which was entirely appropriate if this was 'now'. In particular the painted-on door and the fire were just right, the curtain gag (twice) was cleverly engineered and I liked the way the spindles in the banister collapsed – nicely done.

Props were numerous and just as was required – someone had worked very hard on this, but somehow didn't make it into the IES bit of the programme!

Lighting must have been fun for Brian – suitably awful but always effective, and nicely timed as far as I could tell... And sound of course played a very large part in the mayhem – very good.

Costumes were many and varied, and changed into and out of with considerable alacrity, where necessary. I think the only one which disappointed me was Letitia's cloak and hat – black didn't seem right at all for such a flamboyant American character, particularly in a comedy. And I think Mr Goodbody's suit would have been better as a grey chalk-stripe, for much the same reason. Otherwise they all seemed suitably 'Farndale'. I wasn't entirely sure about Audrey's dress for the fashion parade – it looked surprisingly like a shorter version of what she was wearing as Lady Doreen, which was a bit confusing... Gordon's spacesuit though was a triumph!

Hair and make-up all fine – nice moustache for O'Reilly, and the prop one for Col King was well used, and I loved the fact that Mr Goodbody had his drawn on (and kept thence forward – nice touch). Suitably 'Farndale' wig for Rose and I liked Violet's curlers. Make-up all looked OK though I think you could perhaps have had more fun with over-doing this. Gordon might have gone to town with guy-liner and orange foundation for instance.

PRODUCTION

It's always difficult in a spoof to be sure what was deliberately directed to be awful and what didn't quite work for real. I suppose you can get away with all sorts of stuff by blaming it on the 'Farndale ladies'! On the whole I reckon you stuck very close to the scripted business and relied on the Farndale formula to pull you through, which is a perfectly reasonable approach but did, I think, mean

that the production lacked spontaneity and possibly wasn't as funny as no doubt the authors had hoped it would be. Because this is, in my opinion, a pretty dreadful script with such a lot of all-too predictable gags, I think you were always going to have your work cut out to make it entertaining. The fact that a large percentage of people were laughing quite a bit was very much to your credit and I heard a lot of them saying afterwards how much they had enjoyed it, so I'm sure you can count it a success.

Could it have been funnier? Yes, probably. Certainly the second half was significantly better than the first, in my opinion, and I think this was because the pace picked up a lot. It also contained that priceless bit between O'Reilly and Daphne where they are miming to 'I Could Be Happy With You' and this worked a treat, especially when they swapped voices – lovely, and blessedly inventive! I also enjoyed the dance which exposed some real talent; I was getting very tired of good actors pretending to be bad actors and it was so refreshing to see something done to the best of Maggie and Adam's ability – bravo!

I was asked in the interval whether I was enjoying it... I probably mumbled something non-committal, but the truth is I admired it much more than I enjoyed it. The whole team worked incredibly hard to put this off, and I do realise what skill it takes to do something deliberately badly. Very difficult in rehearsals to judge what is going to work and what isn't – I imagine you all fell about laughing at the initial read-through, but by the time you've done through a scene a few times the 'funny' wears off, and even your director begins to lose objectivity. The audience is probably your only guide – in something like this, if they are laughing helplessly then you are getting it right, and if they go quiet for a while then something's wrong and needs fixing with some inventive business. I wondered whether you had brought in what we call in FDC an 'external eye' once you were running it, to represent an audience and give you some feedback?

The things which worked much better than I expected? – well, the collapsing set at the start was beautifully engineered, despite my misgivings, and got us into the mood. People in the audience were commenting loudly to each other about it, which is just what you want. Also the quiz was splendid because you got us going nicely – wonderful to see a forest of hands obediently waving their slips, and some demanding pens and taking the whole thing so seriously. Well done!

And things which might have gone genuinely wrong – well, I didn't spot much, though I suspect you did intend to show us some sort of film at the beginning because the projector was turned on and the lens cap moved up, but for some reason the screen remained blank. Your actors covered it very well, and fortunately the script allowed for this, but the scene would have been more amusing with at least some sort of home movie going on. Also characters slipping unintentionally on those banana-skin chess pieces – had one of them actually fallen flat on their back it would have been wonderfully funny (though probably dangerous), and had anyone on stage responded to the mobile phone going off in the audience I think it would have brought the house down! As an audience we are wonderfully attuned to pick up clever ad-libbing - it has a different quality to the rehearsed version on which this play depends so much, and is so much more entertaining.

PERFORMANCES

What a stellar cast you had assembled! Everyone seemed to take on their roles with gusto and were clearly very well-rehearsed. I don't think the apparent slowness on the first night was because of uncertainty with lines – it was perhaps because it hadn't yet bedded in or been annealed by exposure to an audience, and I very much hope that the relative fluidity we saw in the second half will have translated itself to the whole of subsequent performances.

Mrs Reece – Irene Glynn

A very 'big' role in both senses and I thought you gave us a suitably imperious and dictatorial 'Phoebe' in her own right, with a good sense of rivalry with Thelma, and also some amusing work in all the five other roles she gave herself as director. The voice you (as Phoebe) used for your address to the audience was pitched a bit high I felt, and needed some variety in tone in order to make the most of those long monologues, but you did find some humour in them as your confidence grew and in particular I thought you managed the quiz very well. It was interesting that your Mr Goodbody started out as though he couldn't remember his lines – this would be one interpretation of the script as written, but didn't chime well with the fact that Phoebe was playing him, and I think the alternative would be that she had taken on so many parts that she'd forgotten for a moment which one this was!

Thelma – Maggie Goodall

What a treat to see you on stage, Maggie! I thought you played 'Thelma' with great understanding and quite a bit of truth, and her dislike of Phoebe was nicely conveyed. Your main role in the murder mystery was of course Daphne, and you did this convincingly badly – lots of front-acting, and dreadfully wooden, but clearly very taken with O'Reilly (or was it Thelma who was taken with Gordon? – probably not, judging from the faces we saw when the big pink heart was lowered – but I thought this interpretation might have been an interesting twist on the original and would have added some more depth). The mimed singing and the joyous dance was a highlight for me. Your role as Rose, in that terrible nylon wig, rather passed me by and I don't think we actually saw anything of Gladys Knight, did we?

Felicity – Lucy Monaghan

We didn't see much of 'Felicity' as far as I remember, apart from that beautifully timed "Gordon? It's too late" which got a big laugh. However we saw plenty of Pawn, which you seemed to relish and made a very good job of, and this was fun. I also very much enjoyed your cheerful Mrs Castle, in the scene which had been added later by the authors and which was new to me, and of course the crusty old Colonel King! I very much admired your comic timing in all three roles. Good work.

Audrey – Felicity Forrester

Did the authors let us meet 'Audrey' at all? I don't think so, but your skill as an actress allowed her to peek through in the corpsing with Gordon, and in her

determination to get the armchair in the will-reading, which was nicely done. We also got the occasional aside, and of course that nice little scene as Violet when Audrey drops her contact lens. You had fun too in the small role of Joan, which Audrey didn't seem to bother to differentiate from her performance in the even smaller role of Ruby. I sensed that she didn't make much effort with Doreen either (in that presumably she was playing herself) and if this was what you intended to convey then this was most impressive. It might also account for why Audrey made no attempt to dress up for the Fashion Parade, though she did pose and walk rather beautifully. An interesting display of subtle detailed acting.

Gordon – Adam Smith

I really did want to meet 'Gordon', and it was a shame that the only time the script allowed us to do so, as far as I can remember, was when he was dressed head to toe as a spaceman, with one line and an indeterminate accent. However you had good impact as Insp O'Reilly, complete with Irish brogue, and you made this work nicely. What might have added more depth would have been some indication that he (Gordon) has had this part foisted on him at the 11th hour but I think we can blame the authors for not mining this more successfully. I think I might have suggested his coming on with a script, which would have allowed some amusing business maybe. The song was very funny and you showed some nice footwork in the dancing. Very good stage presence, excellent comedy skills and a pleasure to watch.

SUMMARY

Did we have "uproarious and carefree laughter"? Yes we did – particularly as we warmed to the performance, and those moments when you escaped the Farndale formula and found something interesting and original were delicious. I would have liked to see if you could explore an extra layer of unscripted comedy in the characters themselves and in their inter-relationships, but for me this was largely missing when I watched it on opening night.

However the audience certainly seemed to go home happy, so it definitely wasn't a disaster, despite my reservations about the script.

I think you overcame the problem of having such weak material. You all worked extremely hard to make the production a success, and I salute you. I just hope people were genuinely laughing with you at how bad it all was, and that at least some of them went away musing on the skill and experience it takes to make it seem so, within this context!

Thank you very much for inviting me to adjudicate, and for your hospitality.

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