

Knights in Plastic Armour

By Robert Shearman

The Warehouse Theatre, Ilminster

Friday 8th February 2013

The Play

This was Robert Shearman's fourth play for the Stephen Joseph Theatre. The following is from a review by Dave Windass for the 1999 production:

“Shearman avoids giving a history lecture, although there are some interesting points about 15th century battling to take home, instead focusing attentions on conflicts in the characters personal lives.

Six battles and a few laughs later the conflicts are resolved. During the light comedy, Shearman raises some interesting points, noting a nation's disrespect and disinterest in historical events marked by thousands of deaths. It makes you think, as Barbara is wont to say. Invariably, and this is Shearman's point, it doesn't.”

As an ex-teacher I noted references to the demise of history teaching in schools, which caused huge concern for the Humanities team which I worked in and latterly managed through the following decade. It is interesting to note that the future of the subject has been firmly rescued by more recent emphasise the importance of its position within the curriculum.

None the less I suspect that the participants in history re-enactment, like The Sealed Knot etc., are seen by most of us as a rather strange crew of people with a fairly obtuse hobby and no doubt recruiting new members to such groups is a struggle. You can certainly believe that to be married to someone who has this particular hobby would take huge patience because you either have to join them or spend a lot of time apart from them.

I enjoyed the play enough to want to know more about Robert Shearman as this unpublished work suggested a talent for writing and comedy. He has been a writer for Doctor Who and of six plays for BBC Radio 4. He has received several international awards for his work in theatre. His mentor was Alan Ayckbourn and plays written under his influence proved very popular. He has a local link, in that he was made resident dramatist at The Northcott Theatre in Exeter In 1993, the youngest playwright to be honoured by the Arts Council in this way. In addition to his TV work and Theatre and Radio plays he writes books.

So this production was off to a good start because the script was well written. I must admit when the photocopy of the typed script arrived on my doormat my heart sank because this has sometimes been the prelude to a difficult theatre experience. It also has a non-stock scenario and setting. The characters are amusing and cover a good range of ages so that there is scope for a diverse cast. The scenery and costume present a pleasant challenge. There is plenty to keep the sound and lighting people busy and creative. The director has merely to cast the play well and then ensure that groupings and positioning, on what is basically an open stage, work so that the audience has an entertaining evening.

Presentation

Gordan Neagle handled the set design himself, no doubt inspired by what he had seen at the Stephen Joseph production, or was that done in the round? Anyway, I liked the fact that the whole of the stage was covered in artificial grass including the stage front, allowing the very edge of the stage to be used. This was a great help to you with such a small stage to work with. I wonder where you sourced it, it can be hellishly expensive. The team of **Goodall, Goodall and Perkins** must have had sore knees after securing it all. The backdrop and tabs had been nicely painted with hosts of trees and rolling hills. This was a lovely piece of work by **Adrian Kingdom**. The inclusion of the little hummock which could be moved to suggest the different battle fields was a good touch and gave some variation of height, allowing characters to sit, be hidden etc. The audience, in the end, greeted its movement during the scene changes as a part of the entertainment.

This and the inclusion of the pot with the artificial cow parsley added to the number of things that the stage hands had to deal as they removed armour and other props during the scene changes. With just two of them, **Paul Smethurst(Stage Manager)** and **Tom Hobbs(Assistant Stage Manager)**, they really had their hands full on occasions and the responsibilities for the various items did not seem to have been thought through as carefully as needed to avoid the odd crash and fumble. I wondered whether the actors could have helped by taking off some props during the black outs, but I have not carefully analysed the script to see whether this was in fact possible. However the music of John Dunstable helped to cover the time and set the scene well.

The lighting for these scene changes was well managed by **Brian Perkins**. He also managed to create a darkening sky for the thunderstorm and was able to contrast the summer and winter light as we journeyed through the seasons. Similarly the sound was good with wind, thunder, rain, baby cries and battle sounds at just the right volume. My husband and I argued about whether the mobile phone rings were real or recorded. He seemed to think that they didn't always come from the direction of the phone but I was convinced so there we are. Anyway they were well timed with just one exception which caused an awkward pause.

Costumes were obviously an important element of this play and you had gone to the experts at Flame, Torbay, who specialise in military uniform and armour. Everything about this was perfect right down to the boots. I presume this was also how you sourced the authentic leather flying jacket, helmet, gauntlets and goggles. Wardrobe must have been an expensive item on your production budget. **Jo Neagle** and the cast had ensured the ordinary personal clothes of the cast suited their characters, with Silvey's costume changes for Chloe, as her life changed, being particularly of note, including the wonderful lopsided breast implant. Silvey's wigs were also very important and had been sourced so that the colours changed as required. This thanks to the work of **Vivienne Fletcher**.

There were a large number of important props to source. The weapons presumably came from Torbay. The picnic basket, blanket, bags, folding seat etc. were all good. The chain mail on the pushchair was inspired and the flying cat brilliant. My one criticism would be the use of a machine knit sweater that had been cut, for the gift from Barbara to Keith, which was a disappointment. It did really need to be a hand knitted effort with one sleeve very much shorter than the other. This would have got a far bigger laugh. A pity you don't know my mum, as she has responded to requests for such items to help with plays before now and she is bored recuperating from an operation at

the moment! Otherwise a good effort **Anna Bowerman and Gordon** and congratulations too to Anna for continuity; I certainly didn't notice anything that jarred.

I notice that there is not credit to anyone for choreography the fighting. I presume therefore that Gordon did this himself and I think if you had been able to find someone who is able to do this it would have added something to the production, especially the opening fight which I think is supposed to make us believe for a moment that we have gone back to St Albans in 1455. I think this resulted in a bit of a flat start to the play. If you are ever in need again there is a man associated with the Regal Theatre in Minehead who has done theatre weaponry and fight scenes professionally.

Direction

As I have already said Gordon's first successful piece of direction was in casting people for the roles who looked right for the parts. Some of the cast have had more recent experience than others and this showed in the varying levels of confidence that they exhibited. None the less the teamwork that you had managed to encourage, ensured that there were some slick moments that showed good pace; for example, when characters were required to speak over each other as they had separate conversations. There was an excellent exchange between Stephen, Barbara and Reg, which had this characteristic. The dynamic between Stephen and Chloe was nicely realised with things like the posing for photographs and the dancing and kiss particularly entertaining. The phone sex section was also another very good case in point. The positioning and angles for the moment when Chloe's breast implant was popped were good. Accents were maintained well and sounded suitable. The CPR was a piece of lovely comic performance.

There were moments however that lost momentum and where the pace dropped, usually as a result of some insecurity on the part of an actor. The standard of acting and the naturalness of characterisation were variable with some very strong performances contrasting with others that were weaker.

However grouping and use of space on the stage was good with plenty of variation of height when this was possible. There was no obvious blocking. Most of the humour that could be rung out of the play was achieved. All the actors were audible and many made good use of facial expression and gesture to make points and bring the laughter to a climax.

You had a good vision for the overall look and meaning of the play and interpreted the spirit of it in a way that I think would have satisfied the author. I also think you will have been gratified at the obvious enjoyment of the audience and I am sure that you yourself will have been only too aware of the moments that lacked conviction but which were largely beyond your control.

Performances

Mick Glynn as Reg

I gather from the notes that you have not performed with any regularity in recent years. I think you can be congratulated on creating an empathetic character in Reg. You stumbled a bit over lines in the early part of the play but warmed up and became the assertive leader of the group. You delivered some of your lines very well. I noted, "What wife?", "My life - the edited highlights", "Oh, sorry I can't help you," all of which got good laughs, along with all references to white scabs. The

shattered and broken man towards the end of the play who suddenly realised that the wife he had been so keen to trade off, was a treasure, was a real contrast.

Vickie Hobbs as Barbara

You were ideal for this part, as you are wonderfully statuesque. But you also brought great gentleness to the character. You were suitably sloppy over Keith. You delivered some of your funny lines very well, particularly the celebration of birthdays, Christmas and the Battle of Bosworth. I have already mentioned that the phone sex section was very entertaining, largely because of your reactions. I think you must have enjoyed playing this part a lot and every middle aged woman in the audience sympathised with your desire to spice up the character's sex life. You were a little tentative with your lines on some occasions but this was generally a sound performance.

Peter Schofield as Keith

You were well cast as this non-descript new comer who took on a wonderful fantasy life in your hands, Peter. Your delivery of some of your lines was excellent. I particularly liked, "It's quicker and less sticky," in describing phone sex. The description of removing Barbara's breastplate was done very well. The fact that Keith can't maintain the affair because of his numerous hobbies was also well portrayed with lines like, "I've had to drop out of Creative Needlework altogether," getting a good laugh. Then you revealed Keith's total ineptitude beautifully in lines like, "I've spared society my incompetence," again, getting a well earned response. My favourite was when you were explaining why you wanted Barbara to continue the relationship; "You're the only hobby I've got which isn't a group activity." As a relative new-comer to the stage this was a secure performance.

Dave Levi as Graham

I note this is your third appearance at the Warehouse and I think you were not as confident as a more seasoned performer would have been and you showed some insecurity over your lines. You got a good laugh on, "I decline thank you very much," in response to the challenge to a duel. I think that you needed to inject a little more passion into your character. I think you could have been a bit more bullying in the new leadership role and could have been much more fanatical in the lecture to the troops about the history of the battle. I appreciated your delivery of lines about the decline of history in schools and your continuous side lining into more and more obscure subjects, which had a nice touch of irony. I hope that you continue to grow as a performer through future productions at the Warehouse.

Silvey Webber as Chloe

As your first outing in a play this was a good role for you Silvey and allowed you to demonstrate a fine sense for comedic acting. You were helped in your characterisation by the great wigs and costumes. I was dying to meet the idealised Barry the Boyfriend because your descriptions had made him a three dimensional character in our minds, if not a likeable one. You portrayed Chloe well, as shallow and self-loving and also captured the irony of her being overshadowed by her baby daughter and the gradual decline of her sense of self-worth. Your physical humour was lovely. I particularly liked you posing and pouting for Stephen's camera. Your dancing was very funny and unselfconscious. Also the scene with your lopsided breast implant was very well done.

Chris Williamson as Stephen

I knew you were a fine actor Chris, having seen you in *Double Death* and it was great to discover that you can play comic as well as sinister roles. Your characterisation of Stephen was spot on. You brought all the facets of comic acting together to create the nerd who was hopelessly and breathlessly in love with a bimbo. You used good facial expressions and posture to display his bashfulness. There was also something sinister about the fact that he was obviously stalking Chloe. Your timing and delivery of lines was very good. Your desperate declaration of love was very funny along with your rehearsal of the proposal at the start of Act 2, which was interrupted by Reg, leading to convincing embarrassment. The proposal itself was suitably awkward and naive. Your collapse was a masterful piece of physical comedy and all the efforts to resuscitate you, well responded to.

Overall you all worked well together to bring this mismatched group to life. There were some good pieces of group work and inter play between pairs of characters, and one or two points of high impact. The pace dropped a bit on occasions but moved along pretty well most of the time. Everyone was audible and good accents were maintained. Your audience had an entertaining evening and I think you must have enjoyed yourselves too.

Thank you for a very pleasant evening.

Lynne Wooldridge