

## **HAY FEVER BY NOEL COWARD**

**ILMINSTER ENTERTAINMENTS SOCIETY**

**THURSDAY 6<sup>TH</sup> FEBURARY 2015**

### **THE PLAY**

Noel Coward himself wrote of this relatively early play in his body of work ' It has a small and only set which must lead them (actors)to imagine it is easy to act, poor dears' I certainly agree with that; it is not an easy play to act. It contains some delightfully witty lines, and the play has a certain symmetry; and the wrong couples paring up is a lovely piece of invention. However there is no plot to speak of in this comedy of bad manners, and thus much depends on behaviour and ensemble acting: they need to take ownership of the characters, as do the cast of 'Abigails Party', a much later and more feral exploration of this genre. It may be sacrilegious to say it, but parts of the text are.. well..ordinary. Dialogue is often very witty, but sometimes mundane; to me this is nowhere near as good a play as Blithe Spirit, or Private Lives. The ending, whereby all the guests leave and a hardly noticed by the sparring family is difficult to pull off without it seeming as an anti-climax.

### **PRESENTATION**

The set was beautiful, and also highly practical. The era was embodied, but also it reflected the eccentricities of the family- a rather bilious fauvist painting was on one wall, faced by some sepia photographs of venerable family members. Props showed a good attention to detail, especially with the inevitable tea service. The costumes were delightful..spot on for the characters. There was a recognition of the faux bohemian milieu of the play in the studied casualness of everyday apparel compared to the establishment evening dress in the second act. Technically, everything was very smooth- I know we're not supposed to say anything seemingly bland, but I do believe that for a play like this, the most effective technical effects are always un-noticeable.

### **PRODUCTION**

With another quotation from Noel Coward in mind 'From a professional point of view, Hay Fever is one of the most difficult plays to perform I have ever encountered'. With that in mind, I thought the direction was very good. There are numerous interactions between the hosts and beleaguered guests, and generally these were handled very well. In your blocking and consideration of proxemics you

showed knowledge of the characters and the ebb and flow of their relationships. You were aware of the dramatic importance of the queen bee, Judith, and your direction recognised this.

The energy levels were generally quite high, although I do feel the pace flagged a bit towards the end of act one, but picked up again with the well timed interruptions then silence at the end. In Act two, there was some well directed interplay between Richard and Judith, especially Judith's reaction after the kiss! Less effective was the sequence between Myra and David- there didn't seem to be quite the right chemistry between them, as I think David could have been more of a Roger Allam type Lothario.

A question in my mind was.. are they real 'Bohemians' or are they just playing at it? I might have got this wrong, but I think you considered the family being sheltered, and assumed the role of what they thought of as alternative people. The children in particular, were played as being immature, and naive.

I did like the way that the guests reacted to this appalling family, and how the family reacted to people from a slightly more real world that the Bliss's inhabited, although the final breakfast scene was a bit too muted.

Finally, I think you were aware of the difficulties with this show and addressed them well!

## **ACTING**

### **JUDITH BLISS - ALISON HAINES**

From your delightful entrance in act one, it was clear you had the measure of Judith; an actress on the fade could well be something of a cliché, but I thought you brought a depth to her.

Your character had great stage presence, and early on you clearly established your ever changing relationship with your brattish children; patronising, cuddly and matriarchal.

Again from the outset, your Judith treated her home as a stage, complete with flamboyant gestures and measured put-downs; these were particularly potent as you had a lovely relationship with the audience who responded well to you. I wonder at times, if you could have demonstrated a little more range? More vitriol, perhaps? Just a small point. But I did like the cornucopia of expressions you gave us for the adverb 'winsomely'!

Your duologues were excellent. I loved the way you dealt with the besotted but dense Sandy, and particularly good was your total over-reaction to poor Richard's kiss- one of the high points of the play; and a very original and nostalgic version of 'Plaisir d'amour'!

You took on a very demanding role- Judith is not only a character in the play, but also in her role she is a director of much of what happens on stage. Well done!

#### **SIMON - CHRIS WILLIAMSON**

The audience get the measure of your character very early on- a kind of 1920's Rik Mayall! Your quasi-Bohemian attitudes were well to the fore - your obsession with your artwork, and also your apparent disdain for the conventional. I did like the early banter with your sister; and your energetic physicalisation of this rather bored, intelligent, yet immature young man: disdainful gestures, and petulant body language demonstrated a youth whose bohemianism is skin deep - merely a rite of passage.

Your relationships with the other people were appropriately awkward, and that came across very well, especially with the highly sophisticated Myra. I did feel that your camp portrayal of Simon, although appropriate for the era, was a little too exaggerated, especially as he had persuaded the ultra sophisticated Myra to visit... but I did like his unfledged approaches to her!

You are a very good ensemble player. During the cut and thrust of the ridiculous word game you were a good catalyst, and your reactions and responses to others in the play were dynamic, totally in character, and very entertaining. Well done again!

#### **SOREL - KAYLEIGH PARTT**

Reading the programme I was surprised that this was only your second role with IES. You have certainly acclimatised well to a very good company.

Your role as Sorel I think is one of the most difficult in the play. You are both a rather sheltered daughter, but also a free thinker. You came across as what we would now accept almost as a mainstream independent woman, but in Coward's world it would have been radical. Therefore looking at your performance, we must bear contemporary circumstances in mind.

Like Simon, you engage with the banter and argument, but I felt your portrayal of Sorel hinted at greater depth of character. Your timing, and physicalisation was

very good. And you came across as a free thinker, not particularly feminine. Utterly appropriate.

You were aware of Sorel's unworldliness, however, and I did like your forthright response to Richard's arrival, which contained elements of naivety and pseudo-sophistication. I did also enjoy your stropiness in the silly word game, especially 'we're a beastly family and I hate us!' a pivotal line and beautifully delivered.

Your reaction to your mother discovering the fumbling with Sandy in the library, again showed another side of Sorel - a well played penitent daughter in a non bohemian moment. To repeat, you had a difficult role, but it was well nuanced throughout. Well done!

#### **DAVID - LAURENCE MEERING**

As David, you showed a clear understanding of the genre. You portrayed him very energetically, and generously. You were a very good ensemble player, and you added to the disfunctionality of the family very well.

David, as a character in the play is probably the most unsympathetic; self obsessed, not bothered with his children, and inviting a flapper, who he calls an 'abject fool', for probably not entirely moral motives. You tried to bring some sympathy to David, although he doesn't deserve it. You did soften his nastiness by playing him like Simon, in a rather camp way, which worked in giving the audience more to be amused with. However, in the scene with Myra he needs to be a lecherous old bastard, rather than a fop; this sequence I found quite disappointing, as there was a missed opportunity to add a darker dimension to the play.

However, there was much to commend your performance, especially in contributing to the ensemble scenes.

#### **SANDY - ADAM SMITH**

Sandy is a very two dimensional character. He doesn't appear to be awfully bright, and has a simplistic view of the world. You played the character very well, especially dealing with his star struck infatuation with Judith's shadow rather than her substance.

Your gestures, mannerisms and speech were appropriately gauche, and clearly you were aware of acting a graceless stereotype. The script however, isn't very generous to Sandy, presenting him with rather trite lines, with which you coped well, although some of them could have been more demonstrative.

I liked the way you reacted to Judith's discovery of the library grope - you were quite panicky and deferential, and then in the final scene your gear changed, and you became very sympathetic and we saw your human side! An engaging performance.

#### **MYRA - NICOLA DELLA VALLE**

Nicola, as Myra, you smouldered! And you delivered a very good character reading of Myra. Your big plus was that you looked beyond the stereotype of the twenties gold digger, and made her more three dimensional. Your entrance - an echo and rival to Judith was excellent - both of you seemed to recognise that you had met your rival. Your early put down and patronising of Judith worked a treat. Your treatment of Simon - almost as if he were puppy - was clear evidence that you recognised this in your fine air of matronly superiority in this scene. You smouldered again in your scene with David, and dealt with the troublesome David with alacrity. Lovely acting.

Your reading of Myra was fulsome - you paid great attention to detail in terms of gesture, movement and voice and you made her a three dimensional character.

#### **CLARA - MARGARET BALLARD**

Clara was a delightful character, possibly by being the only representative of the real world. She was a dresser for Judith, but that isn't made much of in the show. I like the way you played her with a world weariness, and studied expressionless delivery of lines. Your irritating repetition of Amy's toothache added a sort of leitmotif worked well, and your moment of insurrection when told there were going to be eight people for dinner was lovely.

Your movements, almost like a robot on tram lines were very funny, as was Clara's reaction when the sugar was reported missing.

Clara is a stereotype housekeeper, and has been repeated since in many plays, but I thought you brought humour and character to the role!

#### **JACKIE - SILVEY WEBBER**

The term flapper is based on a description of a young bird flapping its wings before it learns to fly. Flappers in the 1920's had a contempt for ordinary convention, and enjoyed being outlandish. Interesting then, that Jackie is the opposite of this.

Silvey, you played her absolutely right from the Coward script; she was demure, warm hearted and very intimidated by this wacky family. You communicated your

admiration for David very well early on, and I enjoyed your hesitant conversation with Richard.

Your confusion and frustration with the ludicrous adverb game was well nuanced, eventually resulting in frustration; then panic when her 'engagement' is announced. Your confidence is regained in act three after hiding in the library, with your cure for hiccups.

You played Jackie not as a person who is not too bright (as the family judged her) but as someone from the outside world completely out of her depth. Well done!

**RICHARD - HENRY WILSON**

As Richard, you were the highest status person in the play, and you came across immediately as sophisticated and worldly person. At the behest of a much younger Sorel, you arrived, and you clearly show your attraction to this young wacky girl who, to start, is anxious to please you.

I did like the way you gradually became more bemused by the antics of this family; your expressions during the act two 'game' clearly indicated to the audience your true feelings!

The high spot for me was when Richard and Judith were alone together - we began to see some of his ability to flatter, but after the wonderful moment when you give her a chaste kiss, your reactions to Judith's over-reaction was brilliant. Timing, and expression were spot on as the sophisticated diplomat realises that he, too, like all the guests is out of his depth. A small point - I think if you had played him with a little more arrogance, his fall from grace would have been a little more potent. This was a good well rounded performance.

It was very heart-warming to see a full house on that Thursday evening, and the audience were fully appreciative. The play had challenges, which I think the company met. The enjoyment of the cast was palpable, and the ambience was very positive. Thank you for inviting me!

Dave Walsham