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Society : Bartholomew Players  
Production : Pack of Lies  
Date : 16<sup>th</sup> May 2024  
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

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## Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on the Bartholomew Players' production of "Pack of Lies". Denise herself was at the door to greet me with a copy of the interesting programme.

The Players were fortunate to have their Patron, Laurence Marks, to direct this show; his experience and reputation drew some excellent performances from a talented ensemble. The actors had clearly put a lot of time and effort into their craft: they knew their lines thoroughly (including some lengthy monologues) and they delivered them very naturally and convincingly. Cues were timed well, although there was a (perhaps understandable) reluctance to talk over each other even when tempers were becoming fraught or emotions were running high. A great deal of attention had been paid to the blocking, so Bob and Barbara might sit in different places in the living room according to their responses to news or events, and movements never felt awkward despite the slightly cramped hallway and kitchen-diner sections of the set. Body language was used to good effect, so you could read the emotions of the characters through how they entered a scene, or stood; unnecessary gestures were generally avoided, thanks in part to the realisation that real people rarely just talk, they tend to converse while doing something else. It wasn't surprising that the temptation to use gestures proved strongest in the monologues that were addressed directly to the audience.

This discipline in the acting led to some finely crafted performances and some engaging characters. Chris Carson anchored the piece as the solidly respectable Bob Jackson. Bob works in the defence industry and is quietly patriotic, the breadwinner in a typical sixties suburban household. As the narrative plays out the comfortable predictability of his domestic life comes under threat. Chris persuasively portrayed this deeply conventional man with his mainstream newspaper, his social awkwardness and his deeply ingrained habits around the minutiae of life. The exposure of his neighbours as Soviet agents initially has little apparent impact on him, but he is forced to find the appropriate emotional response to support his more social and vulnerable wife and daughter; Chris managed this subtle character development with skill, using small but telling details (such as slowing down his walk when thinking about the unexpected contact from the security services, and varying the tone and rhythm of his lines) to hint at his fears and uncertainties. His stunned reactions to Stewart's insights into the KGB were perhaps a little overdone, but his telephone "conversations" were timed and pitched unusually well. You could have heard a pin drop in the Hall as Chris delivered Bob's closing monologue, in which he reflected on the impact of the whole episode on his family.

Bob's wife Barbara was portrayed by Elaine Leggett. Right from the start Elaine was able to explore the different facets of this brittle, complex character: the dutiful wife, the controlling mother, the unexceptional citizen being made to feel inadequate by her more confident friends. Elaine was particularly helped by having plenty of other things to do (a spot of stitching or dressmaking in the living room, some domestic chores in the kitchen) which meant that when she paused to express herself her words carried so much more power. The pressure of knowing that her supposed best friend isn't what she seems and has been

lying to her proved particularly painful to Barbara, but then betrayal is difficult to deal with; while her interactions with Thelma and Sally remained comparatively consistent, her conversations with Helen changed incrementally in nature as Barbara struggled to process the change in their relationship.. Elaine took us through her character's emotional responses, including disbelief, denial, anger, withdrawal and resigned acceptance in a way that really engaged the audience – shaping her lines for maximum impact, wringing her hands to reflect her mental anguish, and finally losing control in an emotionally charged outburst that felt visceral and real. Like Chris, Elaine was also convincing on the telephone – “Bye Maureen! Bye!”. This was a fine performance – well done.

Bob and Barbara's daughter Julie, was played by Seren Lemaire. Seren found it challenging to make some of Julie's early lines leap off the page, perhaps because there wasn't quite enough teenage rebelliousness towards her controlling mother in her early characterisation, but she certainly grew into the role: the heated exchange with her mother when Thelma inadvertently gives away the fact that Julie has been out and about on her boyfriend's motor bike allowed Julie to vent a lot of repressed anger and felt completely authentic. Julie's character really started to take shape when the surveillance operation began, and Seren skilfully portrayed Julie's transition from innocent interest to a more mature understanding of the consequences of what was happening around her.

The couple at the root of this upheaval in the Jackson household are Peter and Helen Kroger, played by Gareth Hammond and Claire Crowther. Peter is comparatively private and undemonstrative, conveniently working from home which facilitates his illicit role as a clearing house for state secrets. The monologue in which he outlined his motivation for working for the Soviets was delivered with the understated determination of the true zealot, with tiny pauses to indicate when Peter was searching for the perfect word or phrase to make his point, and Gareth had the accent pinned down. His character's composure really came to the fore amidst the ersatz cheerfulness of the tense Christmas gathering, when Peter's folded arms betrayed his natural inclination to go home before Helen could say anything incriminating; his wife, on the other hand, couldn't help but ask leading questions to try to work out whether or not their friends and neighbours suspected anything. Claire has a larger-than-life stage presence, evident from the moment she breezed round to the Jacksons' to check up on her dress alterations, and she also demonstrated an entirely persuasive American accent. The most impressive aspect of her performance was the way in which she left the audience in doubt about how much of Helen's character was genuine, and how much artifice. Some of her actions and utterances invited suspicion, but were they just facets of her outgoing personality? This was a very well judged performance.

The narrative is driven primarily by Stewart (played by John Casey), a civil servant clearly working for counter-intelligence. The conceit that a member of the security services would actively share so much detail about a live case with the suspects' friends and neighbours is plainly ridiculous, but the provision of a cover story, although more true to life, would have rendered the narrative absurdly hard to follow. John is a fine actor, and smoothly combined the discretion, professionalism and air of aloofness of the career bureaucrat with the cerebral insights of an English Hercule Poirot. His pipe not only hinted at this characterisation, but also gave John something else to do as he paced the room, taking in every detail at a glance as he explained his thinking. John's measured delivery and rich tone compels you to listen, and he too was able to use inflection and expression to leave the audience in doubt about how much he was prepared to give away, and how much he was keeping to himself.

Stewart doesn't do his own field work, so the watching from the window was undertaken by Thelma and Sally (played by Sara Miller and Pip Burns). Thelma was on duty more often than not, and Sara portrayed her as an ordinary woman doing an extraordinary job: polite and grateful towards Barbara, mortified when she inadvertently reveals the truth about Julie and her boyfriend. Sara also succeeded in characterising Thelma as a good listener, a complementary skill to her professional work observing. Pip had much less to do, but portrayed Sally along similar lines.

There was much to admire in the period setting, not least in the way that the manners of the era were presented. I particularly liked the way in which the gentlemen started to get out of their seats when a lady entered or left the room, and other echoes of sixties domestic life were to be found in the hospitality (centred around the drinks cabinet and the teapot) and the chimes of the mantelpiece clock. The solidly constructed set (designed by Steve Ashcroft) made clever use of the wide and shallow stage, with some key dividing walls missing so we could see everything (including instances of characters eavesdropping on each other). The décor and set dressing was packed with period details, including a kitchen cabinet with a sloping front, some suitably dated wallpaper and a functioning picture rail. The properties team (Valerie Grady, Judy Brown and Keith Pimm) provided some excellent details (for example, a black-and-white photograph of Julie was framed and displayed in the Jacksons' living room), and while the artificial Christmas tree with battery lights appeared much too modern, it must be hard to source a real Christmas tree with mains powered Pifco lights in the middle of May ...

The lighting (Luke Frewin, Graham Diacon and Les Allen) gave good coverage, and the capability to light individual zones. I particularly liked the way in which the follow spot was used for the punctuating monologues, effectively and stylishly separating them from the main action. The actors' words could be clearly heard and the sound plot (Steve Ashcroft and Suzie Chadwick) included a good number of effects (such as ringing telephones, and the sound of church bells to indicate that it was Sunday) as well as some atmospheric musical interludes; I did feel that music might have been used more frequently between scenes, as scene changes were often dominated by the sound of footsteps and of onstage doors being opened and closed.

The costumes (Judy Brown and Ann Francis) were well judged: Bob's braces were exactly right, and the muted colours of his sleeveless sweaters dated them to the 1960s as their more colourful brethren didn't really come in until the 1970s. Barbara's cardigan helped her characterisation, with its buttons to play with and its seams to straighten, while Helen's rather more flamboyant dresses reflected her personality – real or imagined. Stewart looked every inch the civil servant, complete with furled black umbrella; however, the pale trenchcoat, while possibly of the time, jarred slightly with me – would the Whitehall bureaucrat have worn that? Barbara in particular had one or two quick costume changes and these were managed well. Hair (Sue Greenwood and Bev Hawkins) and make-up were subtle enough for the venue and appeared true to the time.

I think Laurence Marks, assisted by Debi Lisburn Diacon, was able to bring out the best in the company, and the production values were appropriately high. The tale of the Krogers is a compelling story for the ages, and the play has a strong narrative thrust, but the ensemble was also able to explore the work's underlying themes of truth and lies; of friendship, trust and betrayal. The presentation worked on several levels, and I

think that Laurence Marks' expressed wish that the audience should have as good a time as he did when he first saw the play was comprehensively realised.

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