

Heather Kay May 14, 2025

A sumptuous production of Coward's "self-valentine"

To celebrate their 50th anniversary, Bartholomew Players are presenting another play by Noël Coward, author of the group's first ever production, *Blithe Spirit*.

Yet again, this Bartholomew Players production was a feast for the eye. The drawing room set was a wonderful work of design and construction, with humour and detail in the furnishings, from the little gold Oscars as finials on the bannisters to the magnificent art deco lamps. The cast were lavishly kitted out by the Wardrobe team in utterly gorgeous costumes conveying elegance and panache. As always, it is clear that a lot of painstaking research has been undertaken, with impressively professional results.

Present Laughter depicts a few days in the life of a light comedy actor, Garry Essendine (Gareth Hammond), a character based on Coward himself, and the problematic personalities with which he has to contend as he prepares to travel abroad on tour. It came across very much as a play of two halves: the first Act being more a comedy of manners, with the focus on witty dialogue rather than action, introducing the varied range of characters and setting the scene for the second Act, in which the pace of the plot picks up speed and the action becomes more farcical.

Director Debi Lisburne Diacon has nurtured both great teamwork and strong individual performances. For instance, Kaitlyn Willis, a welcome new addition to the Bartholomew Players, played the starstruck youngster Daphne with a delightful freshness and lightness of touch; whereas Luke Frewin threw himself into the part of Roland Maule, the young playwright from Uckfield mesmerised by Essendine's celebrity, with verve and energy. Sara Miller provided a strong, calm stage presence, as the actor's returning wife, bringing a welcome stability in the context of the shenanigans in progress all around. Elaine Leggett and Chris Carson were entertaining in their very contrasting roles as the actor's "vague-looking Swedish housekeeper" with her perpetually ash-dripping cigarette and cheeky chuckling valet.

Claire Crowther gained my utmost respect. She clearly relished the part of Joanna, the shameless seductress, and looked magnificent in her sparkling gown; even more impressive, however, was her dedication and professionalism – she hurt her foot, obviously quite painfully, soon after her first appearance on stage at the dress rehearsal, but carried on throughout the performance undeterred and with her injury barely noticeable, managing to remain seamlessly elegant and seductive, even with walking stick in hand.

The award for the most hilarious comedian goes to Liz Hutchinson. She played the part of Monica, the actor's loyal and long-suffering secretary, to perfection, delivering her lines with dry humour, acerbic wit and brief meaningful glances which had the audience in stitches.

Essendine himself is a challenging character to play. Not only is it an extremely long part to learn (600 lines) but it is so very multi-layered: the actor has to represent an actor who is continually acting in his everyday life to the extent that it is hard even for him to know where the man ends and the actor begins. Gareth Hammond emphasised the egocentricity, testiness and irascibility in the narcissism of the role, rather than that element of charm which can radiate from such self-love to produce the magnetic matinee-idol effect which has obviously drawn his admirers to him like moths to a flame.

The next Bartholomew Players semi-centenary production will be Gogol's *The Government Inspector* in November.