



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : The Bartholomew Players
Production : A Bunch of Amateurs
Date : 17th May 2023
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on The Bartholomew Players production of “A Bunch of Amateurs” at Eynsham Village Hall. Denise herself was at the door to greet me and provide me with an interesting programme. She was even on hand to draw my wife’s ticket out of the raffle – thank you!

There’s quite a lot to get your head round here. An amateur dramatic society presenting a play in their village hall about an amateur dramatic society presenting a play in their village hall certainly asked questions of the company, not all of which were answered satisfactorily. Staging a play entitled “A Bunch of Amateurs” also invites a particular line of criticism, which certainly isn’t merited. The show provided a challenge, and the company responded with an entertaining production in which there was much to admire.

I can understand why the Players’ chairman, Gareth Hammond, was keen to stage this piece, and to take on the leading role of Jefferson Steele. The idea of a big-shot American being taken on a journey of self-discovery when removed from his comfort zone is a familiar one. In this case, a Hollywood megastar, keen to burnish his serious actor credentials by appearing with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, instead finds himself booked by his incompetent agent to appear with the Stratford Players in rural Suffolk. For Jefferson it’s a long journey, and I’m not sure that Gareth started in quite the right place. Celebrity is an act, and I would have liked to have seen a bit more of the supremely confident A-lister at Heathrow; charming, preening, self-absorbed. Only when the magnitude of his agent’s error becomes apparent would I have expected Jefferson’s arrogance and sense of entitlement have taken centre stage. It was amusing to see how Jefferson reacted to the Stratford Players’ pitiful efforts to satisfy the riders in his contract.

What Gareth did really well was to reveal Jefferson’s vulnerabilities and regrets, particularly with regard to his inflated ego, and his relationship with his daughter Jessica. Protected by the trappings of stardom and the nature of film-making, Jefferson has never had to learn more than a few lines or deliver a sustained performance. There is nowhere to hide on the stage of The Barn Theatre in Stratford. Jefferson’s feeble first reading of the part of Lear stings him into action, and Gareth carefully judged his incremental improvement until there is enough star quality to persuade us that he might once have earned his celebrity status.

Jefferson’s equilibrium is further disturbed by the surprise appearance of Jessica, who is only too happy to point out his shortcomings as a person in general and as a parent in particular. Gareth persuasively portrayed how Jefferson faces up to his demons. He knuckles down, learns his lines, and discovers a love of Shakespeare. He repairs broken relationships. And he falls in love with this group of eccentric but authentic misfits, although whether or not he would have chosen them over a lucrative Netflix contract is open to question.

Gareth cleverly avoided any cliff edges on Jefferson's road to self-discovery so this larger-than-life character remained believable throughout. It's a demanding role, but Gareth knew it thoroughly and drove the narrative forward with commendable pace. He also employed body language to good effect, using gestures sparingly but appropriately and conveying some of Jefferson's private thoughts through a wide range of expressions.

The Stratford community are Shakespearean rude mechanicals for the modern era, but I felt that in this production there was a bit too much of the mechanical. Where do you pitch a character like Nigel Dewbury (played here by Nick Smith), the old-school thespian who covets, but is denied, the leading roles? Nick infused the character with the mannerisms of the self-conscious Shakespearean actor, an old-school actor-manager, but the consequence is that he loses credibility and the drama veered towards melodrama (as Jefferson is quick to point out). Nick's exaggerated gestures and expressions meant that we didn't see much of the person behind the performer, and he remained somewhat two-dimensional.

Ianto Wain played Denis Dobbins, a janitor with ideas above his station in the proud tradition of Peggy in "Hide-hi!" or Colin in "The Brittias Empire". His self-absorption, and totally inappropriate fixation on details of his own performance, will have provoked a pang of recognition in anyone involved in amateur theatre. Ianto gave us some moments of comedy, but not all of them were intentional; he had Covid last week and the lack of preparation and rehearsal was as evident as it was understandable. He smiled his way through his errors and the audience loved him for it.

Jo Burns played Dorothy Nettle, the Director of the Players and a force of nature. While Jo's interpretation of the role was rather more sympathetically self-aware than the character probably deserved, she was able to bring out some of Dorothy's single-mindedness and determination, characteristics which make many of the more implausible aspects of the plot believable. She would have been able to do this even more effectively if she had really known her lines; her indefatigable, "can-do" attitude was slightly undermined by the suspicion that she was searching for the next line. Jo did however give us a Dorothy who possessed some emotional intelligence, as in the way she massaged Nick's bruised ego, and she was also able to bring out some of the complexity of Dorothy's relationship with Jefferson; the kiss they share was admirably unrestrained, but its context was quite ambiguous.

Mary Plunkett, the owner of the local B&B, was played by Louise Taney. Louise really brought out Mary's star-struck devotion to Jefferson, following him around in a rather overstated manner and offering him anything he wants to the point of serious ambiguity. There was subtlety here as well, however; Louise listens well, and is skilled at deflecting the audience's attention back to where it needs to be. If Mary's reaction to finding Jefferson in a seemingly compromising position with physiotherapist Lauren was a little over-the-top, the subsequent change in her attitude towards him was nicely realised.

Lauren was played by Claire Crowther; she is one of the more plausible characters, drawn into the drama by the fact that her businessman husband is the show's sponsor, and Claire delivered a subtle performance that helped to keep the piece grounded in reality. Lauren's professional detachment when deploying her physiotherapy skills on Jefferson generously allowed other actors to extract the humour out of the situation.

Seren Lemaire made an eye-catching debut for The Bartholow Players in the role of Jefferson's daughter, Jessica Steel. A very natural and understated actor, Seren extracted full value from many of her character's more caustic lines; confident in her mastery of the role, she delivered a masterclass in hitting your cues even if she was guilty of throwing away the occasional aside. She also played unconscious very convincingly – I was worried for a moment!

Co-directors Pip Burns and Joe O'Connor certainly brought the play to life, but to my mind it never quite flew. I think it's the difference between knowing your lines and really, really knowing your lines. The actors with the best grasp of the material were able to deliver the most rounded, nuanced performances, while the actors who were less secure found this uncertainty could undermine their characterisation. There were also some issues with the delineation between the "actors" and the roles they played. Characters who were not members of the Stratford Players came across most persuasively as they could be portrayed quite naturally and their "acting" could be quite deliberate; the Players themselves incorporated some of their acting style into their everyday personae, with mixed results. People in the street generally don't utilise the sort of exaggerated and stylised gestures and movements employed by several of the actors here, and while such gestures and movements can be characteristic of amateur performers, they usually (but not always) save them up for the stage rather than deploy them in their everyday lives.

Steve Ashcroft's set design made good use was made of the wide but shallow stage at Eynsham Village Hall, with the area upstage left expertly dressed with an interesting and eclectic collection of properties (even if the posters were the most pristine I have ever seen on any noticeboard anywhere). The black tabs upstage right doubled effectively as an extension of the stage and as a backdrop for the dining table at Mary's B&B, and I liked the way that the cast used the two sets of treads to make their way to and from The Barn Theatre. This had the additional benefit of allowing Hannah Feldman and the stage crew to manage scene changes unobtrusively.

The bottle of Jack Daniels looked convincing, so it was a pity that the company could only manage the lesser miracle of turning wine into water, while the bottles of beer were unmistakably empty. On the other hand the newspaper front pages were realised brilliantly, while Lear's throne, upstage centre throughout the show, allowed parallels to be drawn between Jefferson's character and the part he was playing.

Lighting was good with some noticeably snappy blacks at the ends of the sung interludes; as ever the choice of incidental music was intelligent ("Another openin', another show"), while the sound design allowed every word to be heard. There were also some beautifully apposite sound effects, most notably when the storm of the night before cross-faded into the birdsong of the following morning. The mainstream Shakespearean costumes looked splendid, while the contemporary everyday costumes, which can be so difficult to judge, were nicely matched to the different characters. I did wonder whether or not Jefferson would wear a T shirt with Che Guevara printed on it ... but I could certainly imagine him wearing the shades and baseball cap.

In the end, this play is a love letter to amateur theatre and to the disparate groups of people who come together to produce and perform plays. What could be more appropriate than a bunch of amateurs coming together to stage "A Bunch of Amateurs"? This description probably sells The Bartholomew Players short as

the quality of their productions is consistently high, but this was a timely reminder of the financial and practical challenges faced by amateur companies, and the quality and value of what they do.

Andrew Walter

NODA Regional Representative, London District 12

18th May 2023