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Society : The Bartholomew Players  
Production : Von Ribbentrop's Watch  
Date : 26<sup>th</sup> November 2021  
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

## Show Report

This was my first visit to Eynsham's modern, spacious Village Hall to watch The Bartholomew Players. I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me and for providing me with an attractive and informative programme. Full details of NODA's Poster and Programme Awards are available on its web site.

This was quite a special occasion, as The Bartholomew Players had managed to secure the rights to present the World Amateur Theatre premiere of "Von Ribbentrop's Watch" by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, and the authors were in the audience to see the show and hold a brief question-and-answer session at the end.

In the programme, Laurence Marks recounts how he bought a vintage Longines watch in Los Angeles in 1985. Many years later it was in need of some maintenance, and the repairer noticed that the watch had been engraved with the initials "JVR" and a swastika. Further investigation revealed that it had probably been owned originally by Joachim von Ribbentrop, the prominent Nazi, and could be worth tens of thousands of pounds.

Laurence Marks was faced with a moral dilemma – what should he do? Sell the watch? Donate the proceeds to charity? But who would accept what was essentially Nazi money? So he did what any self-respecting author would do and sat down with his long-time collaborator Maurice Gran to write a play about it.

Curiously, "Von Ribbentrop's Watch" isn't primarily about the watch at all, but the dynamics in a Jewish family in early 21<sup>st</sup> century North London. The curtain rises on Gerald Roth (played by John Casey), head of the household and a purveyor of fine wines, discussing the provenance of the watch he has inherited from his father with a visiting expert. The action then moves forward six weeks, when Gerald receives the report on his watch as his family gathers for Passover.

John Casey was very convincing as Gerald; he has a lovely baritone voice and clear diction, and an uncanny ability to hold natural conversations while apparently concentrating on another task, such as his VAT returns or setting the table for dinner. He was also able to reveal his character's thoughts and reactions through subtle changes in expression, and switch effortlessly into the persona of the wine salesman without a hint of overacting (except, perhaps, when he was reading the letter revealing the value of the watch). Gerald is trying to conceal the fact that his world is slowly unravelling, and the watch represents a potential financial lifeline; John persuasively portrayed a man trying to hold everything together - the traditional values, the aspirational lifestyle, his dignity when eating Ruth's horseradish relish. This was a mature and polished performance.

Elaine Leggett played Gerald's wife, Ruth. When we first meet Ruth we know almost nothing about her, giving Elaine very little to work with, but as the character is built up Elaine's performance grew with it. She ruled her kitchen as a good Jewish mother would; her apron was a vital prop for establishing character, and the way she sharpened the carving knife revealed a woman dangerously close to the edge. Her unconditional love for her

daughter gave Ruth emotional depth, and the revelation that she had converted to Judaism (as opposed to having been born Jewish) explained many of the tensions in the brittle family dynamic. Elaine embraced the development of Ruth's character to give us ultimately a beautifully rounded portrayal.

Gerald's brother, David, was played by Ianto Wain. Like Ruth, he arrives in Gerald's house with little preamble, and like Elaine, David grew into the role as his backstory was coloured in. Ianto made sure that we saw the simmering resentment arising from the preferential treatment that David perceives has always been given to his older brother; the raw grief that lingers from the premature death of his wife; the all-pervading sense of injustice, that life isn't fair. Ianto brought out David's emotional instability through some fairly dramatic mood swings – the flashes of anger and upset usually providing a catalyst for further revelations. Unstable characters such as David are really challenging to play, but Ianto tempered his performance to ensure that we kept believing in him.

Sasha, Gerald and Ruth's daughter, was played by Sara Miller. Like Ruth and David before her, Sasha arrives back home from university with us knowing very little about her; and like Elaine and Ianto, Sara is able to fill in the details with sensitivity and skill. While other members of the family seem particularly adept at ramping up the tensions, Sasha is able to restore some tranquillity, knowing how to calm people down and move conversations on; Sara was able to portray these attributes in an entirely credible way.

The family matriarch, Gerald and David's mother Mrs Roth, was played with evident relish by Deborah Lisburne-Diacon. Resplendent in a pink suit and coiffed to emulate Mrs Thatcher, Deborah's portrayal was wonderfully opinionated and judgmental from the off. Mrs Roth is confident of her position in the family hierarchy, respectful of tradition, suspicious of change, and highly manipulative when things aren't going her way. Ably supported by her handbag, Deborah could wordlessly express her view with a pout or a scowl, and she gave voice to her opinions with a trace of accent that seemed very well judged. Her put-downs, particularly those aimed at Ruth, were sharply barbed, and she made the most of some of the most richly comic lines in the play – I especially enjoyed her observation that the seat in David's car had massaged her all the way up the Watford bypass.

Ed Miller played Mr Blackburn, the watch expert whom we meet just once at the beginning of the play. With his anorak, glasses and specialist expertise, Mr Blackburn is set up as a geek and that's how Ed played him. There is a risk of overdoing it, as the line between characterisation and sending up the stereotype is quite thin, but Ed broadly managed to stay on the correct side of the line despite some over-exaggerated expressions and gestures.

Nick Smith played "The Collector", who turns out (spoiler alert!) to be the spirit of Von Ribbentrop attempting to reclaim his watch. This could stretch the credibility of the audience to breaking point, but it worked really well thanks to intelligent lighting, the clever use of music, and a finely judged performance from Nick. His accented English was just right for the part, and his sparing use of gestures gave an other-worldly dimension to the character. The Collector effectively acts as Gerald's conscience in the most philosophical dialogue of the evening, a conversation that probably couldn't have happened between any of the other characters without hostilities breaking out. Nick summoned the authority to bring a historical perspective to the broad themes of belonging which infuse the play, and point out any metaphors that we might otherwise have missed.

Staging this play was evidently a labour of love for the Director (and Players' Chairman) Gareth Hammond. Having secured the rights through imagination and determination, he showed similar qualities in this uncompromising dissection of the relationships in a Jewish family. The ensemble work was of a very high quality and the fight scene almost alarmingly realistic. I don't think I have ever seen so much broken glass on a stage before – resonating with Jewish wedding traditions and modern history.

The production values were generally very high, and in particular the design and build quality of the set was extremely good. I liked the fitted kitchen, the practical standard lamp, the way that the window allowed a glimpse of outside, and especially the Arne Jacobsen chair which can't have been that easy to source. It's details like these that set the tone for the whole production. The costumes hit the sweet spot between the cast looking over-dressed, and looking as if they had just wandered in off the street, and the music before and during the show expertly established the tone of the piece.

This was a fascinating play, giving an interesting insight into how a moral dilemma can expose and exacerbate the tensions in even a relatively tight-knit family. Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran remarked at the end that it had been "done so well", which is a bigger compliment than anything I can write. So let me just turn to the helpful glossary of Yiddish words and Jewish references at the back of the programme and say "muzel tov" – congratulations!

Andrew Walter

27<sup>th</sup> November 2021