

## Daily Info Review by Heather Kay

### An engaging, if choppy, production

Having been bowled over by the last Hislop & Newman play *The Wipers Times* and by the last Bartholomew Players production *Rutherford and Son*, I was looking forward to something really special when I joined a small band of supporters for the dress rehearsal.

I found the play itself rather patchy – like the proverbial “curate’s egg”. The plot is sometimes predictable, sometimes implausible, and somewhat contrived in places, but also offers some pleasing surprises. All in all, it was a bit choppy, jumping from one scene to another in short bursts, punctuated by soliloquised excerpts from the King Lear Fool’s speeches – I guess this choppiness reflects its filmic origins. The humour was criticised as “stale” by critics of the original film. I think this is a bit harsh: sometimes it is a tad formulaic, but there was plenty of genuinely funny comedic business throughout, on all levels, from visual jokes to ironic observations and throwaway witticisms, and plenty of laughter from the audience throughout the rehearsal. The “bedroom farce” scene was hilarious.

The stand-out performers were the characters playing Lear’s three daughters: Claire Crowther as Lauren, the eager-to-please PR rep from the local brewery sponsoring the play (Goneril); Louise Taney as Mary, the star-struck local B&B landlady (Regan); and Seren Lemaire, as the actor’s estranged teenage daughter Jessica (Cordelia). All three brought their characters to life with total commitment and credibility. “Goneril” and “Regan” shone with energy and charisma. “Cordelia”/Seren Lemaire was a very welcome young addition to the Bartholomew cast: poised, confident, calm, self-assured, a really natural and engaging stage presence, her scenes with Jefferson Steel (Gareth Hammond) were a delight, charting the rapid development of their relationship over the course of the play. Because this, of course, was the true drama of the piece – the opportunity for transformation offered to the egotistical Hollywood star by his unexpected immersion in an AmDram community where the importance of teamwork is paramount.

The dress rehearsal was dogged by two problems. One cast member was ill – but co-director Joe O’Connor made light of this, stepping into the role with such aplomb one barely noticed the script in his hand (as he clearly knew it like the back of his hand anyway!). Another cast member was clearly struggling throughout to remember the lines, with consequently rather wooden delivery, which tended to undermine the pace and energy the other performers maintained throughout. I would hope that with another 48 hours of mental rehearsal, those lines might flow more freely for the opening night and subsequent performances.

I can’t close the review without mentioning the excellence of the whole production team. In particular, Judy Brown and Valerie Grady were rightly billed as “Prop sourcing and assorted magic” – one “large piece of equipment” in particular drew gasps of surprise and delighted applause from the audience!