



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Bartholomew Players
Production : Silver Lining
Date : 2nd December 2023
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on The Bartholomew Players' presentation of Sandi Toksvig's "Silver Lining". Denise, who co-directed this production, was at the door to greet me, along with her co-director and Players' chairman Gareth Hammond. I was made to feel even more welcome when I found that seats had been reserved for me, and that the programme included an interesting article about the history of NODA – not all of which I was familiar with!

This was an ambitious undertaking for The Bartholomew Players, not so much because of the challenges of staging it, but because there isn't much action to drive the narrative. Set in the day room of a care home, the play examines the interactions within a group of older women as flood waters rise outside, and it becomes apparent that if they are to survive then they will have to save themselves.

The first act provides the dramatic context and introduces us to the principal characters. With little happening beyond reports of flood waters rising and the arrival of a couple of unexpected visitors, the nuances in the writing assume even more significance than usual. I felt that the company was, if anything, trying to make too much sense of the script. There were occasions when, in my opinion, conversations between characters might have been better interpreted as interwoven monologues, with ambiguous words and ideas providing occasional points of contact (and humour). The actors were also very respectful of each other, waiting patiently for their cue lines even when they should perhaps have been talking over them – for example, when ellipses had been used. To my mind, this all meant that the dialogue didn't always sound very authentic, although it also meant that, thanks to the actors' clear enunciation, every word came over clearly.

Everything made better sense in the second act; with the flood waters now rising dangerously high, most of the characters have an uninterrupted monologue which helps us to understand their motivation and behaviours. Most of the time there is only one narrative in the room, and the actors seemed much more comfortable making this sound real (although apologising for the occasional fluffed line out of character would be a good habit to break). I suspect that the second act may have been worked on before the first act, as so much of what is revealed about the characters towards the end of the play feeds back into what we saw earlier. Critically, the sense of looming jeopardy meant that we started to care about what happened to them all, and it was poignant that this question was left unresolved.

Sandi Toksvig was clearly determined to use the context of the play to make a few points of significance to her. The rights of same sex couples, tensions between generations and the role of older people in society, lazy racism (even, or maybe particularly, if unintended) and Brexit all got an airing. Most of all, the play addressed assumptions about older people, that life in a care home isn't just about sitting in front of "Cash in the attic", that older people have hopes and regrets, just like the rest of us.

The first care home resident we meet is Gloria Bernhardt, played by Babs Denton. Babs is an experienced performer with a long and distinguished career in local theatre, and I recall her in several of the roles listed in her biography. We learn towards the end of the play that Gloria was a pub landlady whose life was shaped by a doomed love affair with a street artist called Ricardo. Babs channelled this back-story into an energetic and sprightly performance – her Gloria was adventurous and modern, but somewhat self-absorbed and pretty much uncaring about what other people might think. The sewing machine provided a useful distraction for her – I often think actors give more persuasive performances when they are doing something else at the same time – and I have rarely seen a mobile phone being jabbed quite so hard! Babs consistently kept the pace up and drove the narrative, while also finding good cadences in her sentences and providing enough variation in her portrayal of Gloria to explore a range of emotions.

Maureen, played by Elaine Leggett, is a very different character. With her Northern roots, flamboyant outfit and small obsessions, Maureen is a distinctive character with overtones of Hyacinth Bucket. Elaine cheerfully embraced all of this, and also benefitted from having something else to do (in her case, making hats) in the second act; her reasons for wanting to live in a care home – that she was fed up with doing things for other people and was ready to be looked after herself for once – was a joyous affirmation of positive choice. Her most affecting moment, however, came when she was relating the death of her bullying husband, Howard – something she allowed to happen because she didn't immediately summon medical help when he was suffering a heart attack. The measured way in which Elaine told the story, with understated expression and appropriate pauses for reflection and regret, was a particularly moving scene.

Debi Lisburne Diacon played May Trickett, a diabetes sufferer confined to a wheelchair. This left her with very few ways in which to express herself, but Debi reminded everyone just what a capable actor she is by providing us with an understated but emotionally charged performance which combined suppressed anger and common sense in roughly equal measure. May is the vehicle for one of Toksvig's more impassioned themes, allowing us to assume things about her family and her past, before revealing that her life-partner was called Peggy and that May had been denied the freedom to be open about their relationship, or even attend her funeral when she was killed in a traffic accident. Her recollection of how she had met Peggy – that wonderful, carefree, unrepeatable feeling of falling hopelessly in love with someone – was skilfully realised through precise phrasing and the smallest of gestures.

May's sister, June Trickett, was played by Ann Francis. Ann was affected by stage fright and Denise explained that, instead of risking a large number of prompts, Ann had taken her words, often disguised, on stage to provide a feeling of security and occasional practical help. Only rarely did I feel that Ann was reading her lines – most of the time there was rhythm and meaning that could only have been developed through deep familiarity and hours of rehearsal. June's character took time to reveal itself, but Ann was able to combine its facets – blind faith, petty thieving, sibling rivalry – into a plausible whole. I thought that the defensiveness and the passive aggression in Ann's performance were particularly well portrayed.

The last resident we are introduced to is a new arrival at the care home; nobody knows who she is so she is referred to by the name they find on her clothes – St Michael (played by Liz Hutchinson). St Michael suffers from dementia, a condition that can take many forms, and Liz gave a powerful portrayal of someone who can conjure up fragments of information without necessarily being able to combine them in any meaningful way.

This was also a very sympathetic exploration of this quietly devastating condition, illustrating that people with dementia can still have a lot to give and a great deal to live for. Liz's capacity to sit in her wheelchair for a considerable time, essentially doing nothing, was quite remarkable, and the image of her eating a chocolate bar will stay with me for a while.

The five residents of the care home haven't been completely abandoned – they are joined in act one by contract worker Hope Daley, played by Grace Olusola. Hope has a lot to do in the development of many of Toksvig's more challenging themes – inviting us to draw conclusions about where she is from and what her parents might have done for a living, as well as drawing some revealing thoughts and attitudes from the residents. At first there is little empathy between Hope and the older ladies, with Grace powerfully portraying Hope's impatience, resentment and capacity for fear and anger; gradually the distance between the women diminishes and they realise they have a lot to learn from each other. I did wonder if Hope occasionally got just a little bit too cross (albeit understandably), as Grace has impressive physical presence on stage and doesn't need to amplify it.

There is also an unwanted visitor to the home – petty thief Jed (played by Luke Frewin), whose brief cameo appearance allowed Maureen to show her mettle.

The wide, shallow stage in Eynsham Village Hall can be difficult to work with, but it proved well suited to the proportions of a care home day room, allowing for the conceit that the windows were between the audience and the stage. The peach walls were well observed in Steve Ashcroft's set design, and some of the detailing, from the Health and Safety notices and the activities noticeboard to the selection of artwork on the walls – I haven't see one of those pin and thread pictures in a long while – was impressive. Properties (by Valerie Grady) were good, and I can imagine that the inclusion of a sex toy on the props list may have raised the odd eyebrow, although it certainly didn't inhibit the cast. The costumes (Judy Brown) really enhanced the characterisation, including May's sensible trousers and blouse, June's lurid leisurewear and Maureen's bold fabrics; and fair play to Babs for rocking those leopard print leggings.

The set was effectively lit by Luke Frewin, Graham Diacon and Les Allen, with a nice contrast when the power went off as the flood waters rose; I liked the way that the principals were modestly picked out in the lighting plot when it was their turn to deliver a revealing monologue. All the words could be heard clearly and there were plenty of ambient sound effects, many of them emanating from the toilet off the day room. Steve Ashcroft, Nadine Candelin and Graham Diacon were presented with a tricky situation bringing Storm Vera to life; I can understand that a continuous sound effect of howling winds and torrential rain could well have emptied the hall at the interval, but the short bursts of sound, sometimes suddenly curtailed, didn't quite work either.

Gareth Hammond announced before the show that "Silver Lining" had drawn The Bartholomew Players' biggest audience ever – a fitting reward for their ambition in staging this play, and a tribute to the late Gillian Somerscales whose memory was celebrated by this production. Many of the themes explored in this work deserve more exposure, and Sandi Toksvig's amusing but often challenging script held the audience rapt throughout. And there were plenty of observations that we could all learn from: the ladies' matter-of-factness about death, the recognition that we live in the loneliest country in Europe, the thought that life passes you by

when you're busy. It was fantastic that the Players was able to recruit a cast of older women to reinforce one of the production's central messages, that we shouldn't underestimate what older people have to give, and what they are capable of. Congratulations to The Bartholomew Players for having the courage to stage this work, and for doing such a good job in bringing it to a West Oxfordshire audience.

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