



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Bartholomew Players  
Production : Ladies' Day  
Date : 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022  
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

## Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on Bartholomew Players' production of "Ladies' Day" by Amanda Whittington at Eynsham Village Hall. Denise herself was there to greet me, and she also provided me with a helpful and interesting programme. The revised criteria for NODA's Poster and Programme Awards are on the Association's web site.

"Ladies' Day" is a popular play to stage right now, and it's not difficult to understand why. It's a contemporary, bittersweet analysis of broken dreams, an ensemble piece with four distinctive but complementary roles for women. It therefore plays to the strengths of many amateur dramatic societies, as was the case here. The Bartholomew Players had also cast three new members into leading roles, and their faith in new and emerging talent was not misplaced.

The narrative is based around four women who work in a fish-packing plant in Hull, and who make a last minute decision to attend Ladies' Day at Royal Ascot in the year the meeting was relocated to York. But this isn't really a play about a day trip to the races; it's a play about life's ups and downs, about hopes and dreams, about the contrast between what people want out of life and what they actually get.

One of the four women is leaving the factory (she insists that she is not "retiring") so the trip is agreed to mark the occasion. Pearl, played by Lesley Robinson, is the senior member of the quartet, and Lesley brought out Pearl's reflective, slightly melancholic character. She cleverly hinted that Pearl has hidden depths, so when the whole story of her secret affair emerges it feels real; the way that Lesley adjusted her dress as Pearl confessed all to Jan was well observed. The scene with her estranged lover Barry was touching, with Lesley able to give us an insight into Pearl's feelings through her gestures and expressions. A subtle performance, especially as Lesley was obliged to perform with her arm in a sling.

Pearl's closest friend in the group, Jan, was portrayed by Navreet Dey. Loud, opinionated and defensive, Jan has had to cope with her husband leaving her, and she has invested everything in her teenage daughter who is about to leave home to study. The royal procession on the race course gives Jan an excuse to sound off about Camilla and Diana, but we all knew what Jan was really talking about. Navreet really developed the character of Jan when she has had too much to drink, betraying confidences and letting down her guard; her portrayal of a drunk was alarmingly good, and I feared for her hat when it looked as if she might throw up into it. Navreet's non-verbal reactions were well-timed, notably when Pearl was making her confession, and mostly subtle enough for such an intimate venue.

The women are only able to get into the racecourse because Linda, played by Liberty Foreman, finds a purse containing four admission tickets and a lot of cash. Linda is a repressed character, in thrall of her mother, short of cash and life-experience, and far from the sharpest tool in the box. Liberty brought out all of these characteristics, and movingly explained how her mother had become a malign influence on her life; she also

allowed her honesty and inner goodness to shine through, and we loved her for it. Her innocent happiness looking forward to sharing a pizza with Patrick the jockey was enough to give anyone pause for thought, and the way in which Liberty fiddled with her hair when Linda was chatting with him was an authentic touch.

The final member of the quartet, Shelley, was played by Becca Howard. Shelley yearns for the celebrity lifestyle to escape from her humdrum existence and mounting debts. When she meets Jim McCormack (played by Nick Smith), a racing commentator off the telly, she assumes the persona of “Sahara”, and Becca might have developed this into more of an alter ego rather than just an assumed exotic name. Becca was at her best when things aren’t going Shelley’s way, adopting a tight-lipped expression that said everything that needed to be said. She also skilfully portrayed Shelley’s realisation that Jim’s offer to pay her £200 to accompany him to dinner was not the entrée to the celebrity lifestyle that she wanted it to be, but something altogether more sinister and unpleasant.

Director Deborah Lisburn Diacon drew a sensitive performance out of each of these key actors, who gelled pretty well as a group. The conceit is that they had been working together for years, but I didn’t always feel that they could finish each other’s sentences, and “interruptions” were occasionally preceded by small but significant silences. There was a proper emphasis on clarity, and the clever and witty dialogue deserves to be heard, but I didn’t always feel it was pacey enough to sound natural and authentic.

Although discussion of the women’s relationships with men features prominently in the ensemble work, the men themselves are transient; indeed, all the parts could be played by a single actor. The Bartholomew Players sensibly opted to spread the work out a bit. Gareth Hammond took on two roles: Fred, the ticket tout, all flashy attitude and gold chain, confident in the knowledge that he at least is on to a winner; and Joe, the factory supervisor. Gareth was surprisingly upbeat in this latter role; I had imagined that the supervisor in a fish-packing plant would be cynical and despondent, but Joe was portrayed as quite chipper, and noted that the agency workers had put in a decent shift. Perhaps he was buoyed by the news that his visa application to go to Australia had been approved.

Nick Smith played Jim McCormack, a racing commentator strongly reminiscent of the late John McCririck, complete with deerstalker hat and glasses on a chain, and notorious for his self-described male chauvinist views. Nick portrayed McCormack as personable and professional on camera, but with more questionable motives when off screen. Nick could perhaps have made a bit more of this contrast: for example, the tic-tac demonstration gave opportunities for McCormack to trespass into Shelley’s personal space. Perhaps the suggestion that McCormack might behave inappropriately was felt to be, well, inappropriate; perhaps it was awkward that Shelley was played by Nick’s real-life niece. In any event, it felt to me like an opportunity missed.

Patrick, the jockey on board the ladies’ pick in the final race, was played by Ianto Wain. Patrick has been beaten down by the constant demands of his job – the long hours, the lack of recognition, and particularly the routines and starvation diets to meet the weights. Ianto started at a disadvantage – he appears in fine shape and happily wouldn’t get close to making the weights as a jockey – but he captured something of his character’s loneliness, and his internal conflict between hope and despair. His Irish accent was sprinkled with a few vowel sounds from other racecourses he’d visited, while his monologue about an unfolding race was a bit like his mount, in that it promised much, lost its rhythm in the home straight, and ultimately came up just short.

Ianto also popped up as Kevin, a punter for whom gambling had become a very real problem. Kevin had lost his shirt, and Ianto was close to losing his. Kevin rather stumbles into the narrative, presumably to make the point that a flutter on the horses is actually very unlikely to make your dreams come true, and Ianto compensated for his character's lack of subtlety by delivering an understated performance.

Barry, played by Steve Ashcroft, is Pearl's secret lover who appears towards the end of the play. Or does he? I'd never previously entertained the possibility that the encounter between Pearl and Barry doesn't actually happen, but this is suggested by Pearl's observation that Barry feels cold, so perhaps the scene is simply an expression of Pearl finding closure and peace. Steve portrayed Barry with tenderness and empathy, and there was a real sense of shared happiness reaching an inevitable conclusion. This was the one scene in which I felt the dialogue could have been slowed down a bit – there is a lot here for everyone to reflect on. The final moments, when Barry hands Pearl her discarded betting slip in what is to prove a fateful moment, was handled very well.

The scenery was cleverly constructed, with two large trucks spinning round to provide either the back wall of the fish-packing plant, or the entrance to York racecourse. A picture of the grandstands had been printed onto the backcloth: I suspect that this cloth was delivered folded up. The properties were good, although the fish in the packing plant were barely glimpsed, and the fact that the benches were being auctioned at the end of the run gave an insight into the tight budgets for production such as this. The costumes fitted the era and reflected the various characters well. The costume change from factory overalls to racecourse finery – a feature of the play – was facilitated by stage hands in the equivalent of "blacks" who entered into the spirit of the Tony Christie soundtrack, in a break from theatrical conventions.

The lighting design worked well in the two very different settings, although it was difficult to avoid the two large trucks casting some shadows onto the backcloth. The pre-recorded race commentaries included some crowd noise, which meant that as the commentary was faded in and out the atmosphere went with it; might it have been possible to have had some background sound on a separate recording so the crowd could be heard continuously? There was factory sound at the beginning of the play, but some continuous, very low level background noise might have added credibility to the whole scene, or at least induced the four ladies to work harder. TV documentaries about factories always show the workers operating with astonishing speed and accuracy, but while Pearl had an excuse, Jan, Linda and Shelley (in particular) needed to demonstrate the pace, rhythm and skill that would result from years of experience doing the same job.

None of this is meant to detract from what was an enjoyable, polished and thought-provoking production. The four ladies delineated their characters well and the ensemble work was generally impressive as they all seized on conversational starting points such as what they had had for dinner or seen on television. Eynsham is indeed fortunate to have such a talented group bringing life to its Village Hall with productions of this quality.

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