National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society : Bartholomew Players

Production : Abigail’s Party

Date : 27th November 2019

Venue : Eynsham Village Hall

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Report by : Rob Bertwistle

 Show Report

Thank you for the kind invitation to attend Bartholomew Players production of the iconic and timeless Mike Leigh classic Abigail’s Party. I really like this play and have fond memories of watching a televised version in the 1970’s with Alison Steadman leading this uncomfortable glimpse into the aspirations of the lower middle classes and the hidden emotions and conflicts which surface between relative strangers when there is a catalyst - in this case rather too much alcohol. I was very much looking forward to seeing this production and I certainly was not disappointed.

The five strong cast worked well together and each character was well drawn without becoming a caricature. This is a difficult play to perform with much of the action and dialogue being delivered from rather static, seated positions. Only Beverly gets to move around the stage to any extent refilling her guests’ drinks, offering nibbles (cheesy pineapple on sticks!) or flirting unashamedly with the new male neighbour. The interest never waned and the narrative moved along nicely keeping the audience constantly engaged in the action so well done to all the actors - you were a joy to watch.

Claire Crowther was outstanding as the monstrous Beverly the overbearing and domineering hostess who will not take no for an answer and soon has her guests plied with far too much alcohol. Even before the guests arrive we see her drinking gin and tonic and sensually moving to the strains of Donna Summer. Claire understood the character perfectly and performed the role with consistency and credibility making the character all too believable. We all gasped when she announced that she would be putting Sue’s gift of a bottle of Beaujolais in the fridge! Not once did Claire let the characterisation slip delivering her often cringe-worthy lines with confidence to chuckles from the attentive audience. Claire used the playing area to good effect looking relaxed and very much in control of the situation. It is quite a feat to be constantly on the move, pouring drinks, lighting cigarettes and remembering and delivering lines in character. Claire managed to do all these things superbly well and gave a most memorable performance with the added bonus of clear diction and good projection.

Nick Smith turned in a credible performance as Beverly’s long suffering and career driven husband, Laurence. He brought the character very much to life with some well-timed interactions with Beverly. Nick conveyed well the embarrassment felt by Laurence as his wife flirts, get drunker and more argumentative by the minute and reveals how different they actually are from each other. Laurence’s unfortunate demise in the closing minutes of the play was handled well. I wasn’t too sure about the wig which Nick wore. I realise it was to look more in the time period but it didn’t look very realistic. But that aside Nick gave an impressive performance enhanced by clear diction and good projection.

The new neighbours and first guests to arrive are Angela and Tony a curiously contrasting pair. Angela all giggles and chirpy chat and her monosyllabic husband a former football star but is (as Angela in her usual tactless way points out) now just a computer operator. Elaine Leggett played Angela to perfection with a great characterisation and some excellent comic timing. ‘Ange’ as Beverly is soon familiarly calling her giggles and talks inanely about her happy marriage to ‘Tone’. We soon find however, as the evening progresses and more alcohol is consumed that things are not quite as rosy as Angela believes they are. A top notch performance from Elaine who in the closing minutes of the play reveals a stronger and more mature side to Angela as her nursing skills are suddenly very much in evidence.

Ianto Wain played Tony with just the right amount of disinterested bored husband coupled with being flattered by the rather less than subtle advances from Beverly. A difficult role to portray with relatively little dialogue to deliver with mostly monosyllabic responses to the comments from the other cast members Ianto really made the character believable and managed to get the humour in the role across very effectively. The tension between him and Angela was well done and his flirting in return with Beverly was also amusing. Ianto used the stage well and his diction was clear and well delivered.

Completing the line-up was new comer Mary Fisher as the reserved and rather shy Susan. We learn that she is the mother of (the never seen) Abigail whose teenage party she has been banished from for the evening and so is a guest at Beverly and Laurence’s party. Susan is obviously from a different mould from her fellow party guests. She is quiet and seems slightly awkward and out of place in the clutches of the over-bearing Beverly and the tactless Angela. Beverly plies her with alcohol (which eventually causes her to rush to the bathroom to be sick) and cigarettes when it’s clear she does not like smoking.

Mary was very convincing in this role with some excellent stagecraft. We were genuinely embarrassed for her as Angela tactlessly probed her private life including her recent divorce. Another great performance and one to savour. Many congratulations to all the cast for providing some excellent and compelling performances.

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Director Gareth Hammond had done an excellent job bringing these characters to life with some astute direction and clever use of the stage. Each character was believably portrayed and all interacted well in the various situations which arose during the course of the action. The pace was good and apart from a minor memory lapse the story unfolded with the increasingly comic and often cringe-worthy dialogue being delivered perfectly. I liked the tension which was well constructed between the couples and which eventually engulfed the whole cast as the tragic climax is reached. Many congratulations Gareth.

I was saddened to read your comments in the programme with your Chairman’s hat on about the difficulty of encouraging young men to join the group. I wish I could offer some words of sound advice. Has the group thought of staging a musical or maybe a seasonal panto? These seem to attract some male interest in my experience but of course bring with them their own draw-backs and problems.

Steve Ashcroft’s sound plot and the lighting by Graham Diacon and Lee Miles really enhanced the action and atmosphere of the production from the chime doorbell to the dimmer controlled lighting. Everything looked and sounded splendid. I liked the muted but steadily increasing volume of music from the party next door and the lighting which perfectly reflected the period and setting of the piece.

The make-up by Ellina Mikhailova, Beth Partlett (and I was told an uncredited Kate O’Connor) looked very much in keeping with the period and style of the production as did the hair design by Sue Greenwood although I have to say that Laurence’s wig was not very convincing while Bev’s hair looked excellent.

I was impressed by the set designed by Steve Ashcroft. It was the epitome of seventies ‘chic’ with the shades of orange complimented by the orange gaudy wallpaper, the drinks bar and the clever off stage kitchen swooned over by Angela. The playing area even though dressed with quite large pieces of furniture principally a very large sofa centre stage still appeared roomy and the actors moved around without too many apparent problems. There were some nice touches of attention to detail the hanging lamp over the table and the record player to name but a few. Trisha Leopold is to be congratulated on the authentic and well-chosen period props. The phone amongst other things looked very good.

Judith Essery and Sally Firth had done a great job on the costumes with Beverly looking very glam in her ‘chiffony’ orange creation while Angela was perfectly dressed in the rather juvenile looking dress with ribbons and large sleeves complete with goofy glasses to accentuate the character. Susan was suitably demurely attired in patterned skirt and sensible blouse. Laurence looked very much the Estate Agent in his suit and Tony looked good in a dishevelled sort of way in his suit. It should be noted that Sally and Judith were also joint stage managers for this production and ensured that the cast and crew were always in the right place at the right time.

The programme designed by the very busy Steve Ashcroft followed the usual format with some interesting facts about the production and the playwright and the always interesting cast biographies and photographs.

Thank you for the warm welcome from the Front of House team. It is always a pleasure to visit you lovely people and this occasion was no exception.

Finally many thanks to the Bartholomew Players and everyone associated with the production for bringing this classic play so vividly to life and may I wish you all every success with your next production and in recruiting some more men to swell your numbers.

Best wishes,

Rob

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