

Society	:	Bartholomew Players
Production	:	Present Laughter
Date	:	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2025
Venue	:	Eynsham Village Hall
District	:	London District 12

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Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on the Bartholomew Players fiftieth anniversary production of Noel Coward's "Present Laughter". Denise was as usual greeting the audience as we arrived, and she kindly provided me with a programme. I was pleased to note the Players' pride in the several NODA Awards won by members of the cast in recent years, and the comments in praise of the Association's summer schools. The new NODA logo was prominent on the programme's cover, but one small point to note is that the box outlining NODA's work has been similarly revamped. I always enjoy being reminded of the Players' recent productions in the programme, and personally I would have been very interested in a listing of all of your presentations to mark your fiftieth year – I imagine that would be a fascinating record of changing tastes and times. Thank you also to director Debi Lisburne Diacon, who found time for a chat before the show.

I expect the Players who first took to the stage in the local secondary school in 1975 would be impressed and delighted by the standards set by the modern company, and the Players chose to mark this significant anniversary with a nod to their very first production, Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit". "Present Laughter" was originally written and staged at a similar time, and is a caricature of Coward's real-life persona; Coward himself played the leading role of Garry Essendine during the opening run, and reprised the role in revivals and in overseas productions.

In the Players' production, Gareth Hammond took on the demanding task of portraying Garry Essendine. It's a significant physical challenge – Garry is onstage for most of the play – and mental challenge – he apparently has over 600 lines. Gareth met these challenges admirably: he has a strong stage presence and he rattled through those lines as if determined not to make what is already a relatively long play any longer. Gareth has form when it comes to playing self-important actors – he picked up his District Best Actor Award for playing Jefferson Steele in "A Bunch of Amateurs" – so it was no surprise that Garry was able to project the arrogant self-assurance and selfish unreasonableness of a solipsistic star.

But Garry is more than this – he is a caricature of The Master himself, and the script provides clues to his personality: Joanna describes him as an "affected egomaniac" and refers to his taut, strained manner. Matters of caricature are inevitably subjective, but for me, Gareth's characterisation was a little bit too tetchy; his Garry possessed the irritated impatience of a busy man whose time is being wasted, rather than the amused superciliousness of a genius unconcerned by everyday matters – or other people's feelings. The impression I retain of Coward's work is that he was incredibly mannered, with every detail in place: appearance, posture and diction all precisely calculated. This was coupled with a sort of languid superiority – the effortless put-downs, the utter confidence in his unparalleled ability, the overarching sense of entitlement. Other people's lives could be no more than a mild irritant to such a character, but here Garry allowed himself to be flustered by the mayhem unfolding around him, rather than merely observing it with cool detachment.

That's not to say that Gareth didn't give us many of Coward's more celebrated traits in his characterisation: witty, sometimes cutting ripostes were delivered at lightning speed, cigarettes were smoked stylishly, and the character retained the air of a circus ringmaster even when some of the acts were going rogue. But Gareth could perhaps have developed these traits further: Garry needed to be delighted by his own witty remarks, and perhaps relish their acidity with a half-smile or an arched eyebrow; he needed to have that touch of fastidiousness that would have driven him to arrange himself precisely in his wing-backed chair, perhaps with legs elegantly crossed rather than with feet flat on the floor; and he needed to have that unshakeable belief in his own exceptionalism, an arrogance that allows him to treat lesser writers with disdain, and other men's wives as his own.

Coward wrote "Present Laughter" to provide himself with a bravura part, and Gareth certainly gave us a bravura performance even if one or two of The Master's traits just eluded him. The lengthy monologues were structured and shaped well with plenty of tonal and dynamic variation, and cues were hit sharply so the pace remained high, although there were a few occasions where a breathing space would have allowed the audience to reflect on an observation or spot a double entendre. Gareth also knows how to manage a one-sided telephone conversation, interspersing his lines with the occasional "um" or "er" as we all do. He held centre stage comfortably even if his body language might sometimes have been a little more assertive, and for the most part he reserved his gestures for when they were really needed. And he dealt admirably with one of those unforeseen mishaps that can blight any live performance; every switch he touched proved completely unresponsive as he strode through his studio to turn off the lights, only for the onstage practical lamps to switch themselves off in sequence, and for no apparent reason, a short while later. Never mind! On with the show!

Much of the play considers Garry's relationships with women, and in the opening moments we are introduced to Daphne Stillington, played by Kaitlyn Willis, who managed to misplace her latch key the previous evening and has therefore spent the night in Garry's spare room. This soon seems rather unlikely. Kaitlyn brought a heady mix of radiance and innocence to her characterisation, and it was entirely plausible that Daphne could have been attracted by Garry's reputation, and that he could have fallen for her charms. Kaitlyn certainly looked the part, resplendent in a pair of Garry's pyjamas accessorised with a silk dressing gown, but some of her opening dialogue with Garry lacked a little spontaneity, and her telephone manner barely allowed her interlocutor to get a word in edgeways. Garry holds her hand when he is trying to manipulate her emotions and this would have worked better if he had been forced to take it rather than have Daphne proffer it to him. Daphne is soon sent on her way, but Kaitlyn was able to give her portrayal rather more bite when she returns to audition for him in the second act. "I've loved everything you've ever done!" she announces with barely concealed ambiguity, before quoting his own poetry back at him: this was an empowered embodiment of a scorned woman.

If Daphne is still in awe of Garry's genius, his secretary Monica Reed got past that stage a long time ago. Monica knows Garry rather better than he knows himself, although "less intimately than some", and Liz Hutchinson gave us a straight-talking, combative and somewhat acidic portrayal of this central character. Monica is quite prepared to stand up to Garry, both physically and metaphorically, up to and including talking over him on occasion; Liz backed this up with some strong body language despite a slight tendency to gesture excessively. She is also a very expressive performer, able to sum up her view by merely glancing at the audience, and she hit her cues and delivered her lines in an appealingly no-nonsense manner.

Sara Miller played Liz Essendine, Garry's wife, with calm assurance, maintaining control of herself and the situation even when everyone else was becoming over-excited. Garry and Liz are separated but have never got round to getting divorced, so Liz has had to learn to be tolerant of Garry's relationships and behaviours. Sara brought poise to her portrayal of Liz, thanks principally to good posture, while keeping her hands clasped together helped her to avoid over-gesturing. She is a particularly good listener; a slight inclination of her head indicated concentration, and looking consistently at the person who's talking enabled her to deflect the audience's attention to where it needed to be. Sara shapes and inflects her lines very naturally, and her interjections were well timed; this was particularly evident in her dialogue with Monica, a kindred spirit, while conversation with Garry took the form, perhaps inevitably, of a sharp exchange of views.

Claire Crowther clearly relished playing Joanna Lyppiatt, a predatory female quite prepared to put on a show in order to add Garry to her list of conquests. With her cane in one hand and a cigarette holder in the other, she still managed to remove her stole so alluringly that half the audience loosened their collars. Joanna wants Garry to stop performing, but if anyone is putting on a performance it's her, and Claire portrayed this very effectively by adding a touch of melodrama to her characterisation. The seduction scene on the chaise longue was a masterclass in courtship rituals as Garry and Joanna traded references to high culture before allowing their supporting arms to cross; their resulting physical closeness made the outcome inevitable even before Joanna encouraged the hem of her gown to ride up to reveal a hint of ankle. Claire was able to include plenty of variation in her monologues, and she shaped her phrases well; Joanna is a little bit larger than life and more than willing to strike a pose as necessary, and Claire pitched her portrayal perfectly.

Joanna's husband, Henry Lyppiatt, was played by John Casey. This felt like a bit of a departure for John, who often plays authoritative establishment figures, and his fine baritone voice certainly lent Henry some much-needed gravitas. Henry often appeared with overwrought manager Morris Dixon, played by Ed Miller; Ed is perhaps prone to slightly exaggerated expressions and reactions so he benefited from occasionally keeping his hands in his pockets, but Ed sits and listens well, and delivers his lines with brisk precision – "Upstairs always smells of potted shrimp". Henry and Morris featured prominently in some of the most farcical scenes, and there was a Corporal Jones quality to their blind panic as they reacted to events in general and Joanna's infidelity in particular. They just about found the sweet spot between an uncharacteristic over-reaction which is amusing because of the contrast with their normal behaviour, and a wildly exaggerated response which could potentially undermine their characterisations.

Garry's success has attracted the attention of Roland Maule, an aspiring young writer played by Luke Frewin. Roland would have been a menace in this age of social media, and he is difficult enough for Garry to deal with as he turns up uninvited at the studio, is totally lacking in social awareness, and ignores every hint that it is time to leave. Roland's behaviour is rather episodic – he can disappear into the background for some minutes before re-announcing himself with his high-pitched laugh or an inappropriate staccato interjection – but Luke pitched his portrayal so that the audience could feel some sympathy for Roland as he is airily dismissed by his idol, while also finding the character annoying. Whether Roland's excessive gesturing was a particularly aggravating facet of his character, or something that Luke needs to reflect on moving forward, is hard to say. The only other visitor to the studio was Lady Saltburn, played by Ann Carson, who accompanies Daphne to her audition. Ann played the part completely straight, a necessary contrast to the collection of highly strung, self-centred egomaniacs who were by now crowding the stage.

Garry is doing sufficiently well to employ staff, and they stick by their boss despite his difficult nature. Elaine Leggett played Miss Erikson, the Swedish housekeeper, in an appropriately down-to-earth manner, thereby providing an amusing contrast to the social climbers visiting Garry's studio. Elaine was apparently coached in her Swedish accent, and the cadences of Miss Erikson's lines were certainly persuasive even if a few of her vowel sounds didn't quite ring true to me – but then, I'm no expert in Swedish accents. Chris Carson played Fred, the former ship's steward and now Garry's valet. Loyal and reliable, Fred did as he was asked while being kept sweet with some generous tips; Chris's expressions, up to and including some big, double-handed gestures, made it clear what he really thought of Garry.

The set, designed by Steve Ashcroft, Keith Pimm and Graham Diacon, featured all the necessary components for a late thirties farce: doorways to adjoining rooms, a short flight of stairs leading to the bedrooms upstairs, a glimpse of hallway and a window on the outside world. The build quality was characteristically high, with proper returns for the various entrances and exits, solid walls that didn't wobble when doors were opened or closed, and a hint of foliage and sky outside the window. The setting was given a wonderful art deco feel principally by two splendid light fittings, and if the furniture couldn't match those lamps for style, it certainly didn't undermine the period feel of the play. The central chaise longue provided the focus for many of Garry's interactions with his female guests, while an adjacent armchair gave Gary somewhere to hold court; in my view, he might have been a bit more possessive about this. A desk and various occasional pieces complemented the decoration, and even the light switches were suitably retro; only a bookcase upstage left looked suspiciously modern. I loved the playbill and signed photograph proudly displayed on the walls, and the Oscar-like statuettes adorning the bannisters! The stage crew (Pip Burns, Imogen Tingle) did well to adorn the set with the detritus of a riotous party in the short interval between Act 2 Scene 2 and Act 3.

The width of the stage didn't feel problematic for once, but there's still a lot of set to dress, and the properties team (Margaret Johnson and Catherine Bailey) ensured that there was a wealth of detail on practically every surface. I was particularly pleased to note that there was a generous supply of actual drinks together with a functioning soda siphon. The costumes (by Judy Pimm, Ann Francis and Kathy Mildren) further enhanced the look of the piece, with many of the characters provided with more than one costume in keeping with the action taking place over a period of ten days. Garry's precisely calibrated pyjamas and dressing gown (and it was a nice touch to have Daphne and Joanna emerge from the guest room in the same pyjamas) contrasted with Morris and Henry's less well-fitted but persuasively period suits. Several of the women benefited from some very stylish day-wear: Liz and Joanna's outfits were notable highlights. Class divisions were evident in the fabrics, styles and colour palettes favoured by Monica and Roland, while the servants' outfits similarly reflected their status. Hairdressing by Sue Greenwood was in keeping with the era – I particularly liked Morris's razor-sharp parting.

Despite the programming issues, the practical lamps onstage added a great deal to the look and feel of the set, and Debi and Graham Diacon and Paul Penny-Jenkin's lighting design in general provided good coverage and variation according to the time of day, or indeed night. The play in some ways is just a sequence of phone calls and visitors, but the sound effects team of Suzie Chadwick and Steve Ashcroft nailed every one of those doorbells and ringing telephones. The music played before and after the show and during the intervals was well chosen, with celebrated Coward songs such as "The sun has got his hat on" and "Everything stops for tea" successfully maintaining the atmosphere in the absence of onstage action.

Director Debi Lisburne Diacon successfully brought out the humour in the piece, although some lines, such as those referring to the spare room, might have been delivered a touch more knowingly; these lines, after all, represent a dance of manners rather than a genuine attempt to deceive. Characters were well defined and characterisation was consistent, although Henry and Morris's blind panic and Garry's angry jumps explored the edges of plausibility; these felt like moments that were funny in rehearsal, but perhaps didn't work quite so well on stage. And would Garry have pushed Roland to force him to sit down? The company knew their lines well and cues were generally hit sharply, to the extent that the dialogue would have benefited from a little more breathing space here and there. The blocking had been carefully thought through; I particularly liked the way that some scenes were played out with one character sat on the chaise longue and another stood behind, so that the audience could see both their faces while the characters couldn't see each other.

This was an accomplished and fitting celebration of fifty years of the Bartholomew Players, a production to impress and amuse in equal measure. It's easy to forget that this is a community theatre group performing in a village hall, and if the Players continue to produce plays to such a high standard then I think they can look forward with confidence to the next fifty years.

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