

Bartholomew Players
Present Laughter by Noel Coward

First impressions were very good with a brilliant set in keeping with the 1930s, in which the play is set.

Directed by Debbie Lisburne Diacon, this production brought a fresh and engaging take to Noel Coward's classic comedy of manners. The play opened with a beautifully staged living room, complete with art period furnishings that immediately set the tone for the elegant chaos to follow. The cast was impeccably chosen, bringing both wit and depth to their roles while navigating the intricate dynamics of Garry Essendine's world.

Daphne Stillington, one of Garry's conquests was confidently played by Caitlin Willis giving the impression that she owned the place until confronted by Monica Reed (Liz Hutchinson), PA to Garry Essendine. Although efficient, she was very cold in her approach to Garry's various house-guests and was a very good foil to Garry. Liz Essendine (Sarah Miller) was the long-suffering wife of Garry, aware that he was having affairs all over the place. The soul- of- discretion, butler, Fred was played excellently and appropriately by Chris Carson. Miss Erikson, the Swedish housekeeper (Elaine Leggett) was suitably dour with a good attempt a Swedish accent which, at times, ended up somewhere between Stockholm and Birmingham.

Maurice Dixon (Ed Miller), Garry's agent, was strong and convincing opposite Garry. However, his gestures became exaggerated as the play progressed somewhat resembling a windmill. Henry Lippiatt (John Casey), Garry's backer was solid in his approach trying to keep Garry in order, and was very convincing, only to discover later that his wife Joanna (Claire Crowther) was also having an affair with Garry. A brilliant convincing performance from Claire completed the trio of lovers fawning over Garry. There was a very effective chemistry between Joanna and Liz Essendine. Roland Mael (Luke Frewin) was a little unintelligible, as his speech was far too fast. However, his maniacal outbursts of laughter were disturbing and very appropriate to his slightly unhinged character obsessive over Garry and his plays.

And finally, we come to Garry Essendine, played magnificently by Gareth Hammond, His command of the script and stage were a sight to behold. With a mountain of lines to learn, which he executed with consummate perfection, he kept the action flowing at a cracking pace throughout, reaching the heights of perfection as the various situations unravelled. Every now and again, there were shades of John Cleese, which was entirely appropriate, and led to an exhausting climax. This was achieved by the appearance of Lady Saltburn, (Ann Carson) aunt of Daphne Stillington, to whom a promise of a stage try out was made by Garry. It was a shame that Anne Carson's acting debut with Bartholomew players should be marred slightly by a wardrobe malfunction. However, she was not fazed by the entanglement of her hat, which was recovered with the help of other the cast members. Ann was imperious, as her character required, and we hope to see more of her on stage in the future.

The play concluded with Garry's staff being paid off for their discretion, as Garry departs on his acting tour of Africa, without all the hangers-on, who were trying their best to go with him

This play was celebrating the 50th anniversary of Bartholomew Players and was an ideal play for this celebration. Congratulations to Debbie Lisburne Diacon on her skilled direction of this play which really shone through. The packed first night audience thoroughly enjoyed the performance and I'm sure that the rest of the run will be equally successful.

Congratulations to all on a superb production, in all aspects, acting, lighting and sound

Nigel James