



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : Blithe Spirit
Date : 12/1/13
Venue : Lopping Hall
Report by : Jackie Mitchell

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Blithe Spirit is probably one of Noel Coward's most famous plays, and is certainly very entertaining, dealing with one man's struggle to deal with the situation when the ghost of his first wife is unexpectedly materialised in the home he is now sharing with his second wife. Because the play is well known, audiences tend to have certain expectations, and there can be no doubt that LADS fulfilled them and more in this production.

The set requirement is a simple living room, with no significant changes throughout the production, but as with all of LADS set, there was nothing simplistic about the set that was presented. The quality was excellent, and the attention to detail in both the set and props really made the stage feel like a front room. The decor was convincing, and of a good enough standard that it was easy to believe it was a room that someone had lavished some care on, and the various pieces of stage dressing, including the pictures and vases, and the lights on the walls that actually lit, together with the light switch, that featured throughout the play, were all nice touches. In addition, the two sets of double doors were stunning, and the greenery outside the French windows was another nice detail that added to the realism of the set. The opening and closing of the doors, together with the falling of the various items at the end of the play was excellently handled, truly looking like a ghostly or magical presence was responsible. The well-loaded drinks table, with numerous decanters containing varying liquids was excellent – so much better than just having one or two of them available for practical use, and the various glasses and crockery were also good, and very in keeping with the style of household the play was set in.

Lighting demands were not too extensive, but the changes were perfectly timed, with the dimming always occurring just as the light switch was turned off by an onstage character, and the dim, greenish light that was used to light the stage at these moments was very effective. There were also a number of sound cues throughout the play, and these were, without fail, perfectly timed – particularly impressive was the phone ring that stopped just as the receiver was picked up. It was a shame that there was no cuckoo sound when Madame Arcati opened the French windows, and mentioned one, but aside from this the sound effects were all excellent.

Costuming was also generally excellent. All the outfits of the living helped to anchor the play firmly in the 1940s, they all fitted the cast extremely well, and there were generally no jarring items that looked odd, or pulled focus from the action. If there is one thing that did look a little odd, it was the costume worn by Ruth in the second scene of act 2, in particular the belt, which simply didn't seem to fit with the outfit, or the character. However, the costuming and makeup of Elvira, and then Ruth once she died was excellent – their pale skin, and whitened hair clearly separating them from the living cast members, with Elvira in particular looking stunning. Shoes too were excellent, always matching the costumes, and also looking correct for the period. Wigs and headwear were also generally good – Ruth's hairstyle was excellent, in itself setting the period, and Madame Arcati's collection of hats was great. Special mention should also be made of the two black arm bands worn by Charles after his second wife died – this evoked a significant laugh from the audience on the night I was there, and was a really clever touch.

With a cast of seven, there were some excellent performances, not least from Howard Platt, as the unfortunate husband, Charles. Howard gave the role a rather dry, and somewhat matter of fact personality, that balanced well with the other characters. His facial expressions were excellent throughout, and his characterisation was completely plausible. His dialogue was clear and well delivered, and his relationships with his two wives were different, but both believable, making it easy to buy into his actions when dealing with the two women together, and also at the end, when he realises he is finally free for probably the first time in his life.

As his living wife, Ruth (at least for most of the play), Liz Adams was also generally good. She came across as a strong, somewhat practical and matter of fact woman, who unexpectedly finds herself in a situation she finds untenable, and with a husband who seems incapable of understanding her point of view. She did seem to trip over her words a bit at times, perhaps due to rushing the dialogue just a smidgen, but aside from this, she gave a very solid performance, and her character was always maintained and convincing, as were her emotions. Her interaction with Elvira once she had died was great, and the two of them complaining about Charles was very well done. Gemma Garside was also generally good as Elvira. Her dialogue tended to be a little sing song, and perhaps a little lacking in emotion at times – aside from the final scene, her expressive style did not change much, regardless of what she was saying and presumably feeling, however, physically this was an excellent performance, she moved brilliantly throughout, and her face and body were excellent at conveying her mood. Her slightly flirtatious characterisation did generally work well, and was a nice contrast to the somewhat more staid and stolid Ruth.

Giving a real tour de force of a performance was Jean Cooper, in the role of the medium, Madame Arcati. While the idea of a medium in general tends to make one think of wafting new age characters, Jean instead gave us a much more prosaic character, with a fantastically amusing characterisation that perfectly suited the dialogue. Her physical performance too was excellent, with so many subtle moves and actions that all helped to build a completely rounded character that was absolutely believable at all times.

Ellie Atanasova gave a very good performance as the maid, Edith. Her opening scene in particular was excellent, and helped to set the tone for the entire evening. Her slightly frantic, desperate-to-please character was very well-placed, and contrasted well with her more dazed performance at the end of the play. She also looked excellent in the role, her petite size and youth helped to build on the idea of a new, young employee trying to impress in what was probably her first proper job.

As Doctor Bradman, Martin Howarth gave a decent performance. At times he seemed a little hesitant over his words, which meant his characterisation dropped slightly, but he was a good foil for the other characters, and he worked especially well at the séance table in his major scene.

Finally, Wendy Butler also did a good job as Mrs Bradman. Her dialogue was clear and well-delivered, and sounded natural throughout her scenes. She worked well with the other performers when she was on stage, and as with Dr Bradman, helped keep the pace up, and move the action along in the few scenes that she was involved in.

New director, Dan Cooper did a generally very good job of the play. The characterisations of the various cast members all worked well together, creating some very funny moments, and the pace and use of space was excellent. There were quite a few moments when characters were talking across, or sometimes even slightly upstage, but although this is not always a good idea, it tended to work reasonably well in this production, and at no point was the dialogue lost. He used the stage very well, creating lots of movement, particularly of Elvira, and this all seemed both natural and humorous. Using the maid to change the set in between the scenes in a dim light was also a good idea, as it meant that even the scene changes seemed relatively natural. Indeed, even in the change where they added the various ghost 'busting' tools, the appropriate characters were placing them, which was a great touch, meaning that even during the scene changes, the characters were maintained – a really nice touch.

As I have now come to expect from LADS, this was an excellent evening's entertainment, and I only hope all your audiences were as full as this one, as they definitely deserved to be. I would like to thank you once again for the invitation and hope I may soon come along to see your next production, which I wish you all the best with.

Jackie Mitchell
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