



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : Dial M for Murder
Date : 15th June 2017
Venue : Lopping Hall
Report by : Jacquie Stedman

Show Report

I was pleased, once again, to have the opportunity of being able to report on your latest production, and also Howard Platt's directorial debut. I have seen Howard in many productions and it was good to see that he had transferred his skill from the dramatic to the all-encompassing directorial. I hope it has given him confidence to undertake the role again, given that this production was so well received by the audience. Whilst I am sure having an experienced cast helped, it is the Director's vision that has to be interpreted and, for a new director, to have an assistant in the person of Dolly Howlett, must have proved invaluable.

I think this is a play that some people assume was written by Agatha Christie, but Frederick Knott provided us with a good story (which meant the audience had to concentrate throughout), and some very clear well fleshed-out and clearly defined characters.

The set was authentic of the early 1950s and, in those days, would have been regarded as elegantly furnished, compared with the utility pieces with which most homes were filled after WWII. It is also interesting to note that, whilst Tony Wendice was a full time tennis player, he didn't command the fees that today's professionals do. I liked the fact that the photographs in the frames were authentic of the characters and the trophies were substantially real for a tennis champion. The props within the room gave it a 'real' feel of a home.

The stylish costume plot was, likewise, very much of the time – dresses for Sheila and suits and sports jacket and trousers for the men with a good sprinkling of hats for everyone (except Max) – well researched. I do think that Sheila would have worn seamed stockings though.

Lighting was simple and appropriate and the voice of Roger, as the announcer on the radio was timed beautifully. Likewise the telephone! The music throughout added just the right amount of suspense and atmosphere. Congratulations to Martin Howarth and his entire technical crew (whatever their department) for ensuring such a well run performance.

There was good pace throughout this production which kept the plot moving well and, apart from one prompt which I heard, the lines appeared secure. Although the play was very wordy in parts there was sufficient movement from the players, during delivery of the long speeches, to keep one's attention and enough changes in the tone of delivery to maintain interest in the story. Everyone looked very natural on the set and moved around it easily. The diction was very precise – very 1950s upper class – portraying a public school camaraderie. The casting for this production, like so many I have seen you do, was just right with each player bringing their own strengths to the roles they were playing.

Karen Rogers suited the character of Sheila Wendice very well. She interacted well with Max Halliday (with whom she appeared to be still in love) yet managed to be the devoted wife to Tony Wendice when he arrived home. Her tall elegance and grace of movement combined with her cool control was maintained throughout Act I which made her descent into fear and nervousness after her attack the more shocking. Her response to the attack was very believable and the strangulation well staged resulting in her killing her attacker. Her reactions to the attack were convincing and it was at this point she started to fall apart, full of shock at what she had done, but still totally innocent of the part her husband had played in the scenario in which she found herself. Her re-telling of the events of the evening in question was particularly well done because she moved her head and her hands in a most natural manner (as one would) to illustrate what she was saying.

Max Halliday (Dean Bartholomew) was the assured writer of criminal fiction. He was confident, articulate and very easy on the stage with an inbuilt assurance in his own talents. His bewilderment at Tony's lack of action on behalf of his wife when he tells him the story he should tell the police was very convincing. His regard for Sheila was apparent and his care for her at the end of the play very touching. The way he had, unknowingly, arrived at the truth of the situation was told with a degree of innocence, but with the knowledge of the crime writer who knows that the plot never turns out as expected.

Captain Lesgate (Adam Rabinowitz) was a much less savoury personality, although he didn't easily succumb to Tony's proposition, until it became apparent that he was going to be blackmailed. He portrayed what would have been called a 'cad' in the 50s and he certainly looked the part. His diction was clear and measured but do try not to keep turning your head to your left at the end of sentences – maintaining eye contact is crucial unless you are going to look directly out at the audience. He managed to maintain a somewhat outraged demeanour when Tony was outlining his plan regarding the murder of his wife, but it was only when he was faced with exposure...and money.....that he finally succumbed. His entry to the flat and the tussle with Sheila, and subsequent stabbing, were well done and he was very brave in choosing to have his face to the audience when he fell at the back of the desk – well done, it would have been much simpler for you to face US but you took the more difficult option!

Tony Wendice was a very different character to those usually played by Lee Kenneth, but he proved his versatility with this part. Like everyone, he moved with ease around the set and appeared very natural within it. He had several rather long speeches which were delivered with clarity and the right amount of movement and inflection to maintain interest both on the part of the character he was addressing and the audience. His facial expressions spoke volumes in lots of places and he maintained his clipped diction throughout. He managed the balance between devoted husband and conning manipulator very well right up until the time his involvement was exposed at the end of the play, when he crumpled and, I suspect, a silent cheer came from the audience at his denouncement. There was an element of control over Sheila throughout the play but this is indicative of the attitude of men to women at the time. He appeared to have the quick mind of the manipulator, and changed his character, and his story as to his movements and the reasons for them, with ease when necessary, sometimes with just the right amount of menace – as with Captain Lesgate.

The law was represented by Inspector Hubbard (Andrew Rogers) who brought an air of calm and logic to the proceedings. He carried his authority with ease and his questioning, particularly of the distraught Sheila, was measured and very authoritative but quite gentle, conveying the character of the successful police officer without fuss. From the time of his entry into the flat the whole pace of the play became very controlled and the final denouement, delivered by Hubbard with his air of authority and conviction, although complicated, was clearly explained enabling both audience and players to absorb the complexities of the solution of the crime.

The tension of the plot built well through Act III making an intelligent end to the play - and this is not easy to maintain when the players know what is due to happen. Unfortunately it is the nature of a play of this kind that the audience sometimes finds relief in laughter at those times when there is tension in the story. The other time, on Thursday evening when we attended, was when Tony rang the flat to get Sheila to the desk in the sitting room. Having then heard the tussle on the telephone one could almost see his face when she picked up the phone again and spoke to him.....which she wouldn't have done had everything gone according to plan. I think that this proves the audience were totally involved in the story – which is where you want them to be. However, I am sure the director warned the cast that this could happen and it didn't faze them in the least.

Thank you very much for making David and I so welcome – it is always a pleasure to come along and cover for Andrew, and I look forward to your next season.

Jacque Stedman
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