



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : Entertaining Angels
Date : 15/6/13
Venue : Lopping Hall
Report by : Jackie Mitchell

Report

Entertaining Angels is a comedy with a real edge of pathos at its heart, and although it touches on the subject of religion, ultimately, it is about the choices that we make, and the fall out when a decision made with hopefully the best of intentions, turns out to be the wrong choice. Focussing on the recent death of a village vicar, this play deals with the wife who is struggling to come to terms with her loss, when her sister reveals that she has an adult son whose father is none other than said vicar. The emotional fallout from this revelation is expertly managed, with the clever characterisations lending some highly believable comedy to what could otherwise have been a somewhat depressing play. The whole piece is expertly observed however, resulting in a truly engaging evening's entertainment, with time seeming to rush by in an instant.

The set was a beautifully designed garden, with the use of stage extension to provide the stream area successfully creating a separate performance space. The use of lighting was also highly effective in completing this illusion. The garden flats used for the stream setting were visually simple yet stunning, and plentiful use of various small trees and other plants were perfect for dressing the scene, creating a slightly wild growing garden. The green floor of the stream was also an excellent touch. The main stage area was also excellently designed. The potting shed looked real, including nice window detailing, and contents, and was used well, while the garden wall with the ivy detail was excellent, as was the house, with the drainpipe and various other details adding reality to the set. The various entrances and exits were all in keeping with the scene, including the door into the house, and the archway to more of the garden, with a great back covering to lend the illusion of more trees and greenery beyond the set itself. The furniture too was all in perfect keeping with the rest of the scene, and the set was a great lesson in the effectiveness of detail for lending an air of realism to the scene, enabling the audience to instantly feel transported to the site of the play. Given the use of the mower on the main stage in the opening, it might have been nice to have continued the green grass floor across at least part of the main stage, but this is a very minor comment.

Given the nature of the play, lighting requirements were simple, but as already mentioned, the lights were used to great effect to focus attention on the relevant performance space and the focused spot on Grace when she made her confession was a good way to highlight the somewhat stark emotion of that moment. Sound effects too were well used, with the bird song, and particularly the stream providing gentle but effective backing to the scenes at hand, and these together with the phone ringing were always well timed.

Set pretty much in the modern day, costuming was not especially demanding, but still there was great attention paid here, with costumes always being perfectly suited to the various characters. It was particularly gratifying that Grace was wearing a twin set when it was referred to in the script! The contrast between Grace and Ruth's outfits in the first act in particular was a great reflection of the different lifestyle and fortunes of the two women, despite their upbringing, while the outfits worn by Bardolph not only reflected his status as a vicar, but also perfectly set him up as a rather countrified sort, and were ideal in helping to instantly fix his character from his first entrance, despite that just being a walk across stage.

Directed by Mary Lowe, this was a well paced and slick production, with generally good interactions between the cast. Overall, the relationships between them were well judged, and although there were a few moments when some of the emotions seemed a little subdued given the subject matter, there were a number of excellently judged moments too - the reconciliation between Grace and Ruth towards the end was very moving and real. The performance space was used to great effect, with all the movements of the cast seeming plausible, and although Grace talking to her dead husband by the potting shed at one point left her perhaps a little closer to the other ladies than might have been ideal, this was unavoidable given the smallish performance space. One moment which was a little off was Sarah returning to the garden in search of her keys, only to find them in her bag. It would perhaps have made more sense for her to have left them on the table or somewhere similar, making her need to return to the scene more obvious - at the very least she should have looked somewhere other than in her bag, even if she eventually found them there, as if she didn't think they were in the garden, why did she return there? However, this is a very minor point in what was otherwise an extremely well-placed production.

The smallish cast of five all worked well together to produce detailed characters who interacted plausibly together, and managed to bring out some well observed humour from their dialogue. Sylvia Zilesnick, as Grace, was particularly adept at this. Her sense of timing was excellent, and she delivered her more humorous lines with a dryness that really brought them to life. Her physical appearance and performance was very well judged, and her facial expression were excellent, really breathing life into her character, and perfectly capturing the slightly uptight, but inwardly wounded woman that was revealed towards the end of the play. Occasionally some of the extreme emotions in her dialogue seemed a little muted, but as the play progressed, this became less apparent, and overall, this was an excellent performance, and in many ways she was the lynchpin on which the rest of the production hung, and she did an admirable job in this role.

As her sister, Ruth, Wendy Butler did a generally good job. She seemed to have a few problems with her dialogue, losing her lines on occasion, and was probably not helped by the somewhat vocal gentleman in the audience, although in general she coped well, managing to carry on despite his rather loud mutterings. Dramatically, she was a more earthy and solid sort than her sister, and Wendy managed to pull this off very well, with some subtle touches, such as rolling up her trousers, that really helped to round out her character. Physically she too gave a strong performance, instantly giving an indication of her character, that was confirmed when she spoke. Her emotions too were generally well judged, and she seemed generally remorseful for her youthful 'indiscretion'.

Sian Williams gave a strong performance as Grace's daughter, Jo. Occasionally her emotions seemed a little superficial and she sometimes came over a little younger than the

role seemed to suggest, but again as the play progressed, this was less of an issue, and her reactions to the emerging situation, and the discovery of her half brothers existence, were very well placed.

The final woman in the play, Camilla Steel, as the new vicar, Sarah, gave another solid performance. Again, on occasion her emotions seemed a little muted, especially when revealing her issues, but most of the time this was a strong performance, with her physical and vocal performances working well together to produce a rounded character, with flaws despite her career choice. Her performance during the argument between Grace and Ruth was very subtle and well judged; it was easy to see her applying their issues to her own situation, which was a very nice touch. Perhaps a little more struggling to get up and down in the final scene, when she was heavily pregnant might have been nice, but this is a minor issue in what was otherwise another good performance.

As the only man in the show, Roger Baker was exceptional as Bardolph. Physically he had both the appearance and characteristics of a country vicar, even his walk and gardening skills rounded out his character in just the right way, and his dialogue too had exactly the right matter of fact tone to it, even when discussing God and His great plan. His interactions with Grace, in the various different times, were all completely real, and it was no effort at all to understand his character. His focus on his sermon writing in his discussions by the stream was perfectly timed to help bring out the humour, and this was a perfectly judged characterisation on all counts.

This was a hugely entertaining play, combining some well observed and very real characters together with a difficult situation, and bringing out not only the pathos and humour of life, but also allowing the audience to reflect on the choices that life offers us, and how our decisions, even those made with the best of intentions, may not always work out the way we hope, and this production really helped to bring the various nuances of the play to life. I would like to thank LADS for inviting me to their final production of the season, and wish them all the best with their next line up of plays. Ninety years and still going strong is an amazing record, and long may it continue.

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