



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : My Boy Jack
Date : 25th October 2012
Venue : Lopping Hall, Loughton
Report by : Jacquie Stedman

Report

This was a play I had never seen before so I viewed it with great anticipation and I was not disappointed.

It was a good choice for this time of the year and in this environment of on-going world conflict. Throughout the performance one had to remember the attitudes of the time and the ideals that war was honourable and that to be killed in the defence of your country was 'your finest hour' – perhaps an attitude that we today would find difficult to subscribe to wholeheartedly, particularly when virtually a whole generation of men were lost during WW1. These attitudes were the fundamentals of this period piece although ultimately this story was about a family and the effects that war had on them, and, sadly, those effects would be the same now as in 1914.

A play of this kind is always very hard to do because characters are real, although the situation may be imagined.

You had built a very solid set – there was no movement whatsoever when the door opened and closed. It was a dark, rather sombre and oppressive room with 'working' wall lights and suitable furniture for the period. Two chairs used for the army office made the change of scene very simple but effective. Good use of the 'fourth wall' being the window to the garden. There was an excellent change of set to the trenches with solid 'sandbags' and ladders secured by being placed behind heavy blocks, with superb atmospheric sounds of rain and bombs, and sand from the 'flies' dropping onto the soldiers in the trench enhanced the feeling of bombardment. Offstage wings area imagined to be an extension of the trench onstage.

You had been able to cast this play very well with strong characterisations from everyone.

Rudyard Kipling (Iain Howland): his was a real patriarchal attitude to his son. He was unused to being crossed as the incident with the *pince nez* showed. His attitude to the coming conflict and how he viewed what the country would be like if the Germans invaded was very forceful, declaring that it was every young man's duty to fight as soon as he was able to. He appeared to have very good relationships with his children, as the scene in Act II showed when they were camping indoors. However, even, then I felt that the stories he told and the parts that the children played within them was an example of the ambitions he had for his offspring even at that stage in their lives. This is a gargantuan role for any actor but Iain WAS Kipling. There was never the impression that he had learnt the words and was just repeating them as he would tomorrow and the next night. This was all said from the heart, his emotion was genuine, his anger and disbelief really heartfelt. When Bird told him the real reason Jack had gone to war, 'to get away from us all' he seemed to visibly shrink with the news that Jack did not hold the same beliefs in the rightness of war as he did. His relationship with Carrie was 'cool' up to the time they found out for certain that Jack was dead and then his need for her became evident, and one felt that same situation would be one that would drive many couples apart today. His collapse onto the sofa sobbing was truly

moving and I am sure that those members of the audience with families could empathise fully with him, especially at that point. But they continued with their marriage and their lives with some semblance of normality until the end of the play when, as much older people (well played) whilst listening to the radio, they heard about the election of Adolf Hitler as the new German Chancellor and Kipling realised that it had all been in vain – what a terrible moment for a father when he realised that the ultimate sacrifice made by his son had, in fact, not helped to solve the problem. Kipling was visibly crushed by the news and Carrie remained as speechless and still as she had throughout the bulletin. His delivery of the poem, when he stood straight as a ramrod, was full of pathos and controlled emotion.

Jack (Ashley Flexen) was played with the gaucheness of a 'nearly sixteen' year old who was rather unworldly, as boys then were. He wanted to please his father but felt that the house and the family environment were stifling. He demonstrated this very clearly in the episode with the *pince nez*. He tried on several occasions to stand firm but was overpowered by the force of his father's personality. When he expressed his desire to leave home, even to go into an army on the verge of war, in such a matter of fact way, this made his whole reasoning so poignant – that even the thought of being shot was better than staying at Batemans with his family. He appeared to be very much in his father's shadow – most noticeable when he went for his medical examination and the two officers (Major Sparks – John Haylett and Colonel Pottle – Jon Gilbert) were speaking to Kipling about his choice of motor car, virtually ignoring Jack, and seemingly making this whole medical situation insignificant. Jack showed his disappointment well and enjoyed his illicit cigarette with his sister with childlike pleasure. Of course, smoking then would not have been considered in the same way as it is today and I am pleased that you kept that scene in. It is very much a part of that era and deserves to be shown as such. (A note in the programme about smoking on stage might have been appropriate). It did not appear that war had made Jack much worldlier, as his handling of the Irish Guards in the trenches showed. He managed to convey his youthful confidence (one supposes newly found) well but did not have the brashness an older officer would have had. After all to be in charge of men older than you when you are only eighteen years old would have been a daunting task. His soliloquy before going 'over the top' was beautiful in showing his fear and his realisation that he might well die in this offensive.

Whilst talking about Jack it seems fitting, at this point, to talk about the soldiers and the whole trenches scene. I found this totally absorbing, and for me it became very real. The noise was overwhelming, the tension of the men very tangible and the fear created by them on the stage very infectious. Something so visual has a way of telling the story so much better than millions of words and the whole scene was very, very powerful. The three Irish soldiers (Guardsman Bowe – Dan Cooper, Guardsman McHugh – Dean Bartholomew and Guardsman Doyle – Peter Galloway) with their very convincing accents and use of language (some of it four lettered) established a scenario which was quite unbelievable and yet had faint glimpses of humour. They all looked very natural with their uniforms and when fixing their bayonets. It is only when Bowe goes with a very caring (and very obviously lame) Mr Frankland (Tom Donoghue) to see Jack's family, that we realise the impact that whole episode had on the man's mental and physical health. Throughout the telling of his terrible story his whole demeanour told of his suffering, his ghastly experience and his horror that he did nothing to help Jack when he was killed. Kipling's refusal to forgive him or to show him any compassion just added to his complete misery.

Carrie (Cathy Naylor) was a mother of the time. She looked after the family and guarded Kipling fiercely. Having already lost one child to pneumonia her devastation at the telegram saying Jack was lost believed wounded was very real. But she never gave up hope and tried over the two

years to follow to gather such information as would give her hope that he was alive. This very hope conveyed a sort of nervous energy on which she appeared to be living until the appearance of Mr Frankland and Bowe who then eventually enlightened the family about the truth of her son's last hours. At this point one would have expected her to faint clean away but I felt she was too stunned by the truth to do anything but sit, trance-like, and try and absorb the fact of the circumstances of Jack's dying. She talked about the pain and how long it lasted with such horror and fear, unable to accept that Kipling appeared to be accepting of the situation. She rails at him for his belief in the glory of war, but then wants nothing more than to be left to be silent and re-live those times when she held Jack as a young boy, feeling the warmth of his body against her as she held him close.

And for Bird (Camilla Steel), the whole episode appears to be pointless to her. All those years when she and Jack shared a good sibling relationship, confiding in each other, were wiped out by what she sees as her father's ambition for his son. When she tearfully tells her parents why Jack went away it brings everything to a head and she gave way to convincing tears and emotion, asking why and demanding the truth. The scene before her wedding seemed rather incongruous, but I would assume it was there to show how life must go on and also to show that she in her way was 'escaping' from the family home, albeit to Belgium with her husband.

The lighting and sound throughout was excellent and added greatly to creating the correct atmosphere. The use of music of the period as the audience took their seats was nicely thought out.

The uniforms and rifles, I know, were authentic and the costumes very much in keeping with the time. I was pleased to see that the ladies hairstyles were also in the appropriate fashion and that there was no unsuitable use of jewellery. A little care needs to be taken when applying facial hair though.

I think the timing of this play was just right and its relevance very appropriate. It was powerful and immensely moving in places. My congratulations go to the entire cast for immersing themselves so thoroughly in the characters, and to the Director for such a well structured, sensitive production.

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