

Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : The Curious Savage
Date : 17 January 2015
Venue : Lopping Hall, High Road, Loughton
Report by : Sarah Buttler

Show Report

On the face of it “The Curious Savage” is a comedic play which contrasts the insanity of the Savage family’s increasingly frantic attempts to regain control of their father’s money with the sanity of the guests in a mental institution who shield Ethel Savage, the step-mother, incarcerated because she wishes to set up a memorial fund with the money – and anyone who doesn’t want to keep the money must surely be insane.

Actually, under JEAN COOPER’s sensitive direction, I found the play dealt most effectively with kindness in all its forms – individuals suffering all manner of delusion who can recognize gentleness and care for their fellow men.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the director’s notes thoughtfully provided by Jean together with a biography of John Patrick, the playwright. I suspect that these were printed at the expense of the cast biographies, which I always enjoy reading, but I do understand the need to balance content with advertising. In this particular case, however, I certainly found that the notes provided some much needed context to the production and to the decisions that had been made regarding the portrayal of the “guests” and the choice of English accent rather than the more usual American. Whilst I agree that the themes are universal and it did not impact my enjoyment of the characterizations that the accents were English – in fact, I would prefer an English accent rather than a badly delivered American one - I did find that they jarred slightly with the Americanisms, both words and references, in the text. Might it have been possible to have adjusted the text slightly to have been more in keeping with the English – i.e. MP for Senator, pennies for cents, pounds for dollars etc.? I imagine it is possible, although perhaps quite an undertaking.

The play builds to its conclusion as the family has their greed and pretensions stripped away through a series of ridiculous and non-productive treasure hunts set by Ethel Savage and as the money is supposedly lost, Ethel is freed from her incarceration with help from her fellow guests. As Ethel leaves the home, she gives a last lingering look at the guests, now friends, who are depicted as they believe they are: Florence, with her son; Hannibal, the ham fisted violinist, now a beautiful tunesmith; Fairy May, graceful and elegant; Jeffrey, confident and assured at the piano; and Mrs Paddy, artist of the most beautiful seascapes. This is a poignant final moment in the play, the impact of which was rather lost by some unfortunate sight lines – the piano and easel were situated at the back, stage right which meant from our position that it was not easy to see Jeffrey at the piano and virtually impossible to view the painting of the seascape, which replaces the awful daubings during previous scenes. The effect of this scene was entirely lost on my husband, who didn’t know the play at all. This was a shame.

That aside, under Jean's direction, the ensemble performed well to produce a thoroughly entertaining version of the play with significant amounts of pathos and humour.

STEPHEN RADLEY and SUE BONNER, set design/construction and properties, evoked the stuffy, claustrophobic ambience of a 1950s parlour very well. The set was beautifully appointed with a recessed bookshelf, a window seat and it was only at a second glance that the audience noted the bars over the window, masking an external pastoral scene. The door, stage left, led to an office or the public parts of the home. This is perhaps more of a directorial point than a set/properties note, but use of this door, and specifically locking/un-locking the door was a bit hit and miss. In the first scene, much is made of the nurse unlocking the door with a key on a chain, but after this point, characters, both staff and visitors, came and went at will.

The stage was well lit by CATHY NAYLOR and TERRY TEW, and some very important light cues were well executed throughout. However, the lighting from outside the window seemed to be set to constant daylight which didn't reflect the times of day indicated by the script. I am not sure whether this was an error on the night we went, or a general oversight, or not possible within the space provided, but it was very noticeable and care should be taken for future productions.

JEAN COOPER AND CATHY NAYLOR should be congratulated on the excellent use of music both before and throughout the production as well as the accurate cueing of some important sounds effects. Some well-chosen music was used between scenes which, in conjunction with dim lighting, masked some very nice, discrete scene changes effected by WAYNE GILBART and KAREN ROGERS.

LIZ ADAMS, HANNAH SOUTHGATE, and CHRISTINE ECKLEY did a good job of reflecting the period and the characters in their costumes, although I wasn't quite convinced by the jackets/suits of some of the male characters, particularly the blue jacket of Dr Emmett. Make-up and hair was also good and in keeping with the period.

The Guests are made up from a disparate group of individuals all scarred in some way by their life experiences. Innocence was ably portrayed in the characters of Florence, PAM MACDONALD, who was certain that the doll she carried around was her four year old son, and Jeffrey, DAVE HINKLEY who is convinced that he is horribly physically scarred from a plane crash. Both Pam and Dave brought a gentleness to their portrayals which was very touching. Dave showed a lovely range of expressions and reacted well when listening to his fellow performers.

Hannibal, NICK MARTIN, is deluded in a different way - he believes that he is a virtuoso violinist. I warmed to the earnestness of his character as the play progressed and felt Nick did well to portray one of the more difficult roles. As a musician myself, I was disappointed that no-one had thought to instruct Nick as to how a violin, and specifically a violin bow, should be held. This was no matter when Nick is playing the violin badly, but rather spoilt the final scene when at this point he should be playing like a professional.

REBECCA PHILLIPS, gave a lovely understated performance as Fairy May and her interplay with all the characters was thoroughly believable and well handled. I imagine that it is quite easy to build this part in a way that might upstage others but I felt that Rebecca, who has a very natural stage presence, was

able to balance the extremes of fantasy and sincerity in her characterisation within the wider production.

WENDY BUTLER, combined laugh-out-loud funny moments with some very poignant dialogue. Mrs Paddy is a gem of a part and Wendy did not disappoint. This is a character whose dialogue is almost entirely made up of lists of things that she doesn't like and Wendy rose to the feat of memory challenge extremely well. Wendy also brought a physicality to the role which I found very affecting. The shuffling gait of a long term patient, or guest, was most acutely observed and deserves a lot of credit.

The Family deliberately contrasts the grotesque greed and avarice of money seeking with the sheltered, gentle nature of the guests. Titus, Samuel and Lily Belle are all studies in unpleasantness and HOWARD PLATT, MARTIN HOWARTH AND KIMBERLEY PACKMAN did a very good job in their characterisations. Howard gave a very good performance as Titus, the bullying ringleader of the siblings, ably supported in his endeavours by Kimberley, Lily Belle, who was as insincere as she was bitter. I particularly enjoyed the biting scene which was played very well by Kimberley. I must admit I felt sorry for Martin because the character of Samuel is so thin that there really is nothing to do, other than deliver a few rather insubstantial lines as best you can. Martin did as well as anyone could probably do – better luck in casting next time Martin!

The part of Ethel Savage, SYLVIA ZILES NICK, must surely be a fun part to play. Acerbic, dry, witty and insightful, Ethel speaks as she finds which is often and with assurance. Sylvia must be congratulated for a very authoritative performance. Kindly with fellow patients, acerbic with the family, and intelligent with the staff, Sylvia was able to find a beautifully straight approach to this character without resorting to finding a “cheap” laugh meaning the interactions with others were entirely sincere.

I felt the Staff – Miss Wilhemina, CHARLOTTE POPE, and Dr Emmett, JON GILBERT – struggled with the rather two-dimensional characters in the script. Miss Wilhemina is a love sick nurse, tending to her husband, Jeffrey, in secret. The character has some slightly awkward dialogue, with questions and few word interjections. It can be hard to bring such a part to life but when Charlotte had some dialogue with Jeffrey, her husband, the acting was tender. Similarly, Dr Emmett, has a number of pieces of dialogue which are medically based and therefore difficult to bring to life but I did find Jon's performance to be sincere. Jon would certainly have more impact if he looked out into the auditorium and projected his voice. When he lifted his chin it made a huge difference to the delivery of his lines.

I am delighted to have been invited to attend your production of “The Curious Savage” and hope that it won't be the last time I see a LADS production. Thank you for your welcome and hospitality.

Best wishes

Sarah

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