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Society : Potters Bar Theatre Company
Production : Absent Friends
Date : 27th October 2017
Venue : Tilbury Hall Theatre
Report by : Gillianne Morris-Monk

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to review your production of 'Absent Friends' and for the kind welcome and hospitality from the front of house team.

Upon entering the auditorium it was like stepping back in time to my teenage years in the 1970's. Congratulations to **Brian Hamshere** and **Colin Smale** for the authentic set. The stairs were particularly impressive allowing us to see some of the action taking place as the characters ascended or descended. There was good attention to detail from the properties and set dressing duo, **Linda Williamson** and **Catherine Little**. The furniture and accessories were spot on for the 1970's, down to the pampas grass and the bar in the corner – the height of middle class chic at this time. The plant in the macramé hanger was perfect, I can remember everyone following the craze and learning how to make them so that every house had dangling house plants.

Lighting and sound design and operation by **Cameron Biggs** were just right. Sadly, audiences only really notice the sound and lighting if there is something wrong and on this occasion there was nothing adverse to report. The lighting was natural with no unlit areas and the '7's music really set the scene for the period.

Costumes by **The Costume Store** and wardrobe mistress **Jenny Colledge** were superb. Each outfit was authentic down to the last detail. Well researched and executed. They brought back far too many memories of wearing similar clothes!!

The programme, compiled by **Jenny Colledge** was very well presented with plenty of information and photos to keep the audience occupied whilst waiting for the performance to begin.

'Absent Friends' is one of Alan Ayckbourn's more well-known plays and definitely needs to be set in the 1970's when it was written. Thank you for not trying to modernise it, which never works. Ayckbourn delights in writing about people who have problems with their relationships and in this, respect, this play is a classic. It is essentially about these dysfunctional couples trying to make tragedy afflicted Colin feel better, when in fact, he is in a good place and in good spirits whereas, their lives and relationships are a mess.

Well done to director **Joy Mather** for encouraging the individual characters whilst bringing them together as a cohesive group of unlikely friends, recognisable to the audience. There was the apprehensive tension as they worry about how they will react when they meet Colin, as well as very good individual reactions when Colin was talking about Carol's death with lovely facial expressions from everyone. When having to politely look at the photos of Colin and Carol each character had a different reaction to Colin's reminiscences so that the audience were perfectly clear how they all felt.

Evelyn – Helen Green

A wonderfully, dense, slightly coarse, out of place character, often oblivious to her baby in the pram. Very funny reading of the magazine, I could almost feel her finger finding the way across the page. Nice facial expressions, especially reacting to Diana and Marge, who are so different to her. I really enjoyed the character voice but be careful when getting het up, that the words do not lose their diction.

Diana – Christine Le Couillard

Suitably nervous and stressed about how she should react to Colin, as well as the idea that her husband is having an affair, I really felt sorry for Diana. Christine worked particularly well in the opening scene with Marge and with Evelyn's monosyllabic answers to any questions posed as an attempt to promote conversation.

Marge – Catherine Little

First-rate presentation of this jolly and effusively voluble, over-enthusiastic character. Desperate for a child, she mothers her husband instead. Very funny when overdoing the baby-talk to the sleeping child and when talking to her sick husband on the phone. Catherine interacted well with each character and particularly with Diana, never dropping her various facial expressions. Body language and demeanour was exactly right for this character. A very entertaining performance – well done Catherine.

Paul – Jorge Frutuoso

A strong character performance, wearing down Diana and making us all feel sorry for her. Nice camaraderie with the other men.

John – George Rowlands

An extremely competent performance with excellent timing. Unfortunately, George is really too young for this role as he should be a contemporary of the others. However, what he lacked in age he made up for in characterisation. His handling of John's nervous energy was exemplary, even when trying to sit still his knee was still jiggling. I look forward to seeing further performances from this young man.

Colin – Nick Vause

Nick is a very accomplished performer and following his award-winning performance in 'Shadowlands' I was really looking forward to seeing how he would handle this role. I was not disappointed. This jolly character is so different to C.S. Lewis and Nick captured Colin with each mannerism and over exuberant reminiscence that so confuses the other characters, who are expecting him to be grief-stricken. Nicely played Nick.

Congratulations to the cast and production team for providing an evening of entertainment, that was very well received by the Friday night audience.

Best wishes

Gilli Morris-Monk
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