



Society : Potters Bar Theatre Company
Production : Don't Dress for Dinner
Date : 31 October 2014
Venue : Tilbury Hall Theatre, Potters Bar
Report by : Sarah Buttler

Report

John Mortimer once commented that “farce is tragedy played at a thousand revolutions per minute” and in PBTC’s production of “Don’t Dress for Dinner” the audience was certainly not short changed on that score. The curtain opens to reveal the interior of a French farmhouse and the comedy of mistaken identities, affairs, and subterfuge sets off at a phenomenal pace which barely slowed to allow for the interval. This play was a good choice by PBTC and showed off the strength and depth in their abilities to excellent effect. It was a thoroughly enjoyable production in every way.

I understand that the set was entirely designed and built in house by COLIN SMALE and BRIAN HAMSHERE (also Stage Manager) for which a well-deserved pat on the back is due. It not only was visually very impactful but was entirely functional for the requirements of the play including working stairs as an entry/exit point and various latched and swing doors. Given the size of the stage, the set was well designed to enable the maximum amount of movement for, at one point, up to 6 actors, whilst at the same time being small enough to foster that sense of claustrophobic panic that inhabits a really good French farce. LINDA WILLIAMSON had clearly worked hard to dress the set in a country farmhouse style and this together with the associated properties added to the overall charm of the staging. Well done to the team.

Having read Director KEITH THOMPSON’s theatrical credentials I was sure that we were going to be in safe hands and certainly Keith ensured the company moved the action along with pace and dexterity. The dialogue crackled along with real verve and yet Keith had clearly worked with the company on their timing so that they had not only mastered the comedy inherent in the piece but they also used the all-important comic pause to excellent effect. There were some truly lovely pauses in the dialogue which really extended the comic value of the written word.

The stage was well lit by CAMERON BIGGS who also oversaw the sound design. The best compliment I can pay Cameron is that I could clearly see and I could very clearly hear (and I was sitting towards the back) and the sound effects were well delivered and timely.

At first glance costuming the play looked like it might be rather straightforward only requiring generic modern day leisure wear. However, as the play progressed, JENNY COLLEDGE had a rather more challenging role, not least of which was finding short sleeved shirts in which to clothe Bernard. I thought the transformation of Suzette’s maid’s outfit into a chic little black dress was excellent, the dresses for the ladies lovely and the deterioration of Suzanne’s dress as she battles with the cooking most amusing. Make up was also good and in keeping with the characters.

The role of Bernard is the lynchpin of the story. It is Bernard's intention to entertain his mistress whilst his wife is visiting her mother that is the catalyst for the rest of the action. It is an important role and he is seldom away from the stage, certainly not for any significant length of time. DICK BREEZE opened the action with confidence and purpose. His delivery was excellent, with lovely inflection, and his reactions and responses to the other characters completely in character. I particularly loved Dick's reaction to the spilt sauce. Dick has a natural stage presence and his was a thoroughly enjoyable performance to watch.

CHRISTINE LE COUILLIARD as Bernard's wife Jacqueline gave a very poised performance in the role of the suspicious but also cheating wife. Her lines were delivered with a good sense of pace and there were some extremely funny moments between her and Bernard and her and Robert which I enjoyed.

The character of Robert has some incredibly difficult passages of dialogue to deliver and all credit to Robert in delivering them well. NICK VAUSE was very believable as the put upon best friend who just happens to be having an affair with his best friend's wife. Nick spoke fluently – although on occasion there was a little hesitancy especially in the extremely long passages when he is attempting to summarise the action – and with a great deal of pace especially in the repartee between himself and Bernard. He was very funny to watch and his performance was compelling as it twisted and turned through the torturous plot fabrications. One small point to mention is to remember that a packed suitcase should always be heavy. If it is difficult to remember then ensure that something is put in the suitcase to give it the effect of weight. There was a point in the performance when Nick was swinging the suitcase around as if it were light as a feather at one point only for Bernard to pick it up and groan at its heaviness a few minutes later.

Suzanne was well played by ALISON REEVE. This is a visually funny role as well as a humorously spoken role with the inherent humour underlined as her initial elegance is eroded as her costume reflects her setbacks in the kitchen. Much of Suzanne's dialogue is based on half-truths and downright lies and Alison was able to navigate the complexity of her lines well and with conviction. I particularly enjoyed the scene between Suzanne and Christine, neither really understanding who the other really was, but both believing that Bernard was having an affair with someone else. I find female roles in farce to be slightly two dimensional because they are usually portrayed as simply the complicating factor for the men i.e. the mistress. However, both Christine and Alison were very good in these roles and brought something more interesting to bear in their performances.

I was delighted to see a relative newcomer to the stage as LAUREN TRYGGVASON took on the role of Suzette. Suzette is the rather mercenary cook who is happy to accept increasing amounts of compensation to balance the increasingly complex lies that must be spun. I liked the light and shade that Lauren brought to this character: at times naïve, and at other times only too knowing. Her interactions with the other characters were nicely played and I look forward to seeing Lauren in future productions.

PAUL LARGE gave a great cameo performance as George, Suzette's husband. Paul gave George an East End gangster edge which worked particularly well with a British audience. This particular role could easily have been an afterthought in casting this production, yet Paul is a confident performer and brought the character to life in a most enjoyable performance.

I thought the Programme design was informative and wholly in keeping with the production. There was also a very nice front of house display about the society and their past productions which I found very interesting.

Front of House is a production in its own right and was extremely well staffed and well run. We were made to feel most welcome by Stuart Frost and his team.

I am delighted to have been invited to attend your extremely entertaining production of “Don’t Dress for Dinner” for two reasons: the first, because it is the first time I have had the pleasure of seeing a Potters Bar Theatre Company production and secondly, because this is my first outing for NODA as your representative for District 10. I very much look forward to attending your future productions and getting to know your capabilities better.

Thank you for your welcome and hospitality.

Best wishes

Sarah

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