

Review of 'Busybody' by the Rotherfield Players 14th-16th May 2009

The Player's production of 'Busybody' by Jack Popplewell proved a great success.

The play was written in 1959 as a vehicle for Irene Handl, a very popular comedy actress who played older cockney women. The director, Adam Hardy, chose the play because he found it funny. He was not wrong- it is a very good comic script. It is a murder mystery centred on an office cleaner who finds the managing director dead in his office with a paperknife in his back. The detective who arrives to deal with the murder turns out to be a man she had known in her youth. Her simple attempts to help him gave us two hours entertainment.

Be a comedy never so good it has to be performed well. The acting laurels go to Jacky Jenkins as the cleaner, Mrs Piper who was hardly ever off the stage. She wisely made no attempt to imitate Irene Handl but gave us a delightful creation of her own. She was very ably partnered by Richard Comben who played Superintendent Baxter, a man who has risen through the ranks and is not too pleased to be reminded of his origins by Mrs Piper. I have generally seen Richard Comben in lightweight comedy roles. He gave us a big bluff grumpy detective whose investigations are hampered by the busybody, Mrs Piper, and a severe cold. It was a nice character very well held throughout the evening. Jacky Jenkins and Richard Comben worked well together. Their comedy sparkled and the audience was chuckling from first to last.

The leading pair was backed up by a very strong cast. Halfway through the first act we had a stage full of characters that had been assembled to give statements to the superintendent. I was struck by how convinced I was by the whole scene. We had the managing director's wife played by Clare Carruthers as a glamorous woman whose marriage had not been happy and had strayed from the straight and narrow- all tears and guilt. There was the firm's handsome young accountant, played by Andrew Burnett- all charm and correct manners. Lynn Lunn was called in at short notice to take the role of boss's secretary. She gave us a wonderful dowdy spinster, devoted to her boss and waspish to all who disliked him. Alice Burrell was the young secretary. This was her first large acting role and she created a nice character- gossipy with Mrs Piper, sharp to the boss's secretary and sympathetic to his widow. They were herded together by the detective constable played by James Green. Two years ago he was the teenage son in 'Caught in the Net'. Yes he was young for a policeman- mind you they all look young to me these days- but his was a committed performance and the magic of the theatre soon took over. The scene ended with the entry of the boss, nicely played by Nigel Burnett as bullish and imperious, who was very much alive and furious to find his office in chaos. When you remember the last part played by each of these actors you realize what a strong versatile company the Players is.

The director Adam Hardy has gone a long way from when I first saw him in the second row of the chorus in pantomime. The staging was very good with nicely thought out movement and groupings. The pace did not flag and the actors all worked well together. The main problem for a young director working on a play set in the 1950s is that there are plenty of us around who remember the 1950s first time round. There was a good period feel to the whole production. The set designed by Andy Miller worked well and was nicely dressed with props by Sue Burnett. It is so hard to get period props pristine enough for a smart office. It all looked convincing. The

costumes, by Helen Gallifant, all worked. Full marks for giving the ladies a change in costume for the day after. The lighting, by Nigel Cassford and Sarah Truelove, and the sound, by Jess Lunn, was spot on cue.

It was a very enjoyable evening, all light and frothy. I look forward to the Players next production, the gritty 'Our Country's Good' in the autumn.

Robert Chesterton

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