

Review of ‘Present Laughter’ By the Rotherfield Players 13th May 2010

There was a good audience at the first night of ‘Present Laughter’ and they were not disappointed. A good audience is just what is needed to bring out the best in the show.

This was the first play to be directed by Chris Walton-Turner and he took a very bold step with the direction.

The play centres on Gary Essendine a ‘matinee idol’ and at 42, is beginning to be concerned by the passing years. He is surrounded by a supporting team comprising Monica, his secretary, Liz, his estranged wife who deals with new scripts, Morris, his agent, and Henry, his manager. He has some rather eccentric staff in Fred his cockney valet, an ex-ship’s steward, and Miss Erikson, his Swedish housekeeper who dabbles in séances. In the play we are introduced to a strange young man who has written an impenetrable first play, to a young debutante who is infatuated with Gary and wants to go on the stage and to her aunt. Add to this Joanna, the wife of his manager, who is also infatuated with Gary, and the balloon goes up.

Traditionally Gary’s support team are played straight and the fringe characters become caricatures. This can be a problem if they are weakly played. Chris Walton-Turner took the brave step of making Monica and Liz more exaggerated and toning down the eccentricity of the other characters. After an initial shock I found it worked well. In some ways the whole play becomes more believable.

Fred and Miss Erikson are difficult parts. The play is set in Gary’s flat and his staff are the backbone to this setting. They make a lot of short appearances throughout as they go about their business. Well played, they tie the action into a real world. Paul McNally made a good sound job of the chirpy Fred as he dashed around the flat. Jane Littlefair played a subdued Miss Erikson with just enough accent to give the full humour to her strange use of English language.

Joanna was not played as the usual brazen vamp. Kate Awcock gave us an extremely attractive and charming woman but with her cap set at Gary Essendine. Her charm made her motive the more shocking and her seduction of Gary the more believable. It was a lovely studied performance.

Steve Bishop as Roland Maule, the disturbed young playwright with a fixation on Gary, created some beautiful moments with his strong handshake and nervous laugh. He was eccentric but within the bounds of reason. Rachel Martin made a lovely job of the silly gauche young debutant Daphne Stillington with her crush on Gary. As her aunt, Lady Saltburn, Deidre Cornford made a lovely cameo performance of the gracious lady. In the third scene Roland appears unannounced just as Lady Saltburn brings her niece to do an audition before the great man. The farce built to a beautiful climax as Gary tried desperately to keep on top of the situation.

Joe Pardo and Adam Hardy gave strong support as Henry, the manager, and Morris, the agent. They gave nicely focussed performances right from the start with two nice distinctive characters. They managed to stand up the strong playing of Gary Essendine without being swamped.

As I have said Kate Organ and Becky Syms played the secretary, Monica, and the estranged wife, Liz, in a strong arch style. It was a bit of a shock as Kate barked out her first lines and when Liz burst in with a 1940 example of power dressing. The lines allow it and it has other benefits to the balance of the play. It is the sort of part in which Kate does well. Becky managed to give us also a degree of charm and vulnerability.

The play stands or falls with the part of Gary Essendine, which Coward wrote for himself. The Players are lucky to have Alan Powell who took the challenge and excelled. Some comic actors have a body language which seems to say- 'Look at me. I am being funny.' Really good comic actors are just funny- and Alan is just such one. He had to ride above the archness of Monica and Liz and he did it admirably. He has a wonderful plastic face which helped to point the humour and he had me and the rest of the audience helpless with laughter time and again. It was magnificently played never over the top and never losing a central humanity.

The costumes were good. I particularly noticed that all the men's suits fitted. That alone needs congratulations. The set was nicely dressed with furniture and fittings. Given that the scenery is set up and painted on the Saturday before the show it was a very good set. The deep red walls suggested the living room of a single man. It was a good idea to abandon the main curtains, which open so slowly, and to run the scenery out onto the apron stage. It cleverly took the eye from the cramped letter box proscenium arch. It all gave the actors the back up that they needed to complete the show.

I promised the Players a constructive criticism. I have just one adverse note to give. I am always pleased to note the versatility of the actors on stage from show to show. Alas I cannot say the same for the Rotherfield Players' window. We see it often. It is small with leaded lights. However you dress it, with unctuous curtains, the size and the lead panes grin through. I should like to see another one and then my joy would know no bounds.

If this is my only carp, it shows you what a great performance it was. It was interesting to hear the comments of the audience as they departed. All were good and how rare it is to say that. Well done one and all.

Robert Chesterton