

CAMBRIDGESHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FULL LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL

1976/77

ADJUDICATOR'S REPORT

HUNTINGDON DRAMA CLUB

TEN LITTLE NIGGERS BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

Whilst TEN LITTLE NIGGERS did not enjoy the marathan run of 'The Mousetrap', it has the same ingrediants, even to similarities in situation, more ingeniously mixed. If only for this reason, TEN LITTLE NIGGERS can be regarded as the Agatha Christie classic, and as such is a fitting choice as a tribute to the grande dame of the thriller. The straightforward 'whodunit', with everyone suspect until the closing moments is a well-trying formula for success.

The problem with the play, however, is that the audience's interest is focussed entirely upon 'whodunit', and beyond this it has nothing to offer at all. Add to this the fact that the play is so well-worn and it is soon apparent that it is not possible to assume that the audience will automatically acquire any real interest in 'whodunit'. Any attempt to revive this play is a little akin to attempting to resurrect the dead. If you happen to have Frankenstein's expertise, you could be on to a winner - otherwise the result is likely to be little more than a breath of wind rustling the shroud on a corpse. To strike an area of success between these two extremes will inevitably prove to be difficult. My own reaction as a member of the audience belied my original view of the play, which stems from a time when I must have been of a more impressionable age.

If TEN LITTLE NIGGERS can be regarded solely as a fascinating puzzle, with the audience completely involved in how each death is brought about and in trying to spot the villian through the mask of red herrings, then for some people it may provide an enjoyable evening, if only on the level of a quiz game. But militating against this is the fact that the play is riddled with obvious improbabilities. How do you make any of these characters credible? How do you cope with the blatantly contrived ending?

My own feelings during the first Act were ones of curiosity on seeing the play after many, many years and of mild surprise that I had forgotten 'whodunit'. Thereafter, however, the weaknesses in the play, which were not counteracted in any way by Ted Sandy's production, prevented my taking any further interest in the identity of the murderer. As this is the only question of importance posed by the play, I can but say that for me the event was a failure.

Had the production managed to overcome the exposed flaws in the play, this would still not have guaranteed success - but we may have moved a little further towards it. The problems facing the producer are several and varied, but collectively they can only be solved by taking the script by the scruff of its neck and wringing every ounce of life out of it. The characters must be given at least the veneer of credibility. Dramatic tension is vital if our interest is to be captured, and this must come through mutual suspicion and timing. The dialogue must be pointed, contrasts established and the pace purposefully varied as the play moves from one climax to the next. Individual contributions varied in these respects and the production as a whole did not pay sufficient attention to them.

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The Performances

Rogers played by Peter Sawford - This is not the easiest of the roles in which to achieve credibility, but Peter went further than most towards establishing it. This, together with a purposeful attack, meant that he was one of the few to capture audience interest. Vocally the performance had a good clarity, which is particularly important in Act I, where his role is largely expositional in that it is Rogers who feeds us with the bulk of the background information. Technically, this was a competent, if undemanding, performance.

Narracot played by David Mace - There is little that can be said of this brief appearance other than the fact that the character's function was adequately carried out.

Mrs Rogers played by Joyce Milton - Joyce took this portrayal well within her stride and achieved a believable identification with the character. She resisted any temptation to 'overplay' and rendered a very natural interpretation.

Vera Claythorne played by Mary Barnard - As one of the three characters to survive the whole play, Vera occupies more and more of the audience's attention as the play proceeds. Unfortunately, Mary's performance did not meet the demands that this focus places upon her. Visually she was acceptable, apart from her wide-brimmed hat which caused a shadow over her face. Vocally, however, her performance left much to be desired. Her voice was artificially stilted and this resulted in a monotonous pace. This improved when the character's animosity began to emerge later in the play, but here we were in danger of losing her words. Generally, Mary paid insufficient attention to vocal expression and for most of the time she did not mean what she said. The unfortunate result was that her performance became a meaningless recital of lines.

Philip Lombard played by Alan Ogden - Alan's intention was clear but not realised in this performance. As another of the play's survivors, Alan did not match up to the demands made upon him. Vocally he was very clear and his dialogue was well-handled and pointed, but physically he was very wooden. The latter may well have been intentional as a part of his characterisation, but if so it did not succeed. Throughout his performance he moved from one conscious pose to another - and neither individually nor collectively were these integrated as far as the character was concerned. The result was that whatever Philip Lombard became he was never the bored adventurer or even the outdated image of the popular juvenile lead. There was a hint of the stylised in Alan's performance, but it became irritating rather than effective and made us more aware of an over-conscious actor than of the character he was playing.

Anthony Marston played by Richard Gregson - There was no credibility whatsoever in this performance. Verbally, Richard was very difficult to follow and had a marked tendency to merely stand and 'say' his lines. It is impossible for an audience to accept an actor who does not mean what he is saying - the whole performance thereby becomes a total waste of everyone's time, including the actor's.

William Blore played by David Mason - This performance showed signs of improvement as it progressed, but much more vocal variety was needed. David's voice was high-pitched and tended towards a monotone, thus blocking any audience interest in the character even before he had had a chance to establish any. His delivery was made at a fast, even pace and as a result he was not always easy to follow, especially at moments when he went too fast for himself and gabbled his lines. All of this got in the way of the creation of the character of Blore. Much may have been caused through nervous tension, as the flaws in this performance became less blatant later in the play when he relaxed more into the part.

General Mackenzie played by John Huston - John possessed a good, mature voice and a sense of status which made him almost convincing as the retired general. I say 'almost' because the effect was spoiled by a lack of certainty about what he was doing and saying. There were far too many moments of hesitation which belonged to the actor rather than the character - as a result he came out of character at these times. It was purely this lack of discipline which prevented this performance from fulfilling its early promise, when he looked and sounded a general 'to the manner born'.

Emily Brent played by Barbara Ogden - Barbara provided an effective contrast as Emily. Her characterisation was consistent throughout but was a trifle forced. Here again there was a lack of vocal variety, however. The 'squeaky' quality in the voice made listening an effort. Physically she was composed and in control, but this was not reflected in her delivery.

Sir Lawrence Wargrave played by Jack Hyde - Technically, this was a solid and competent performance. Jack was credibly a judge, which he played with suitable authority. By the end of the play, however, he had earned my sympathy rather than my admiration. The final denouement was so forced that even insanity was not established. The sudden shock of the judge going completely berserk in these final moments robbed the character of any credulity and made the whole process of the building of the character somewhat fruitless. The element of surprise was in this case dramatically ludicrous rather than effective, rendering the whole play for me an interminable and tedious joke with a very flat punch line, evoking a groan instead of a laugh. I find it very difficult to be constructive here. What else could Jack do? To justify the end there must be means. Clearly the judge is not of sound mind - this is the only factor that can make the end of the play believable or even acceptable - but as the character 'whodunit', it is not possible for Jack to give even a hint of this in his performance prior to this moment. Clearly he was trapped in a situation that would need the most consummate acting skill to overcome. To have to work hard through two and a half acts only to become the helpless victim of so contrived an ending is an unenviable task!

Dr Armstrong played by Michael Williamson - This was a low key performance, which by virtue of this fact alone provided an interesting contrast. Michael's main strength was that, unlike several other members of this cast, he was thinking about what he was saying. Consequently the character was credible and the performance met all the demands of the play.

Staging and Production

The setting served the play well from the point of view of exits and entrances but not so well as far as the atmosphere of the play was concerned. The yellow walls with too little relief were too bright, resulting in the room being airy rather than eerie. The sky backing worked. A centre-backing on a shallow stage such as this poses a lighting problem, but this was well-lit and shadows on the sky (!) were avoided. The open sky and the yellow walls combined presented another problem, however, in that together they reflected the most light on the stage and thus the background became more prominent than the actors. As for the rest of the setting, the furniture was well-selected and positioned, affording some effective groupings and facilitating the comings and goings.

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Apart from the imbalance of reflected light from the set, the lighting generally was adequate, although there were some unfortunate blackspots on the forestage. There were, however, some blatant errors with the lighting practicals. For example, when the change was made to artificial light when the curtains were closed in Act I, the effect was negated by the delay in operating the light switches. Equally, the candlelight in Act III, Scene I was odd to say the least. When consulted about the lighting, I suggested that the candles alone might provided the right effect but I had not realised that a sustained effect was needed. The producer was right in his decision to support the candles with spotlights, but made the mistake of not catering for the separate light sources of the candles. The result was that the light from the support spots came from the wrong directions, creating the oddity that when a person stood within the proximity of either candle with his back to it, his face was lit and the back of his head was in darkness! On the other hand, the lightning effect on the sky backing in Act II, Scene 2, was effective. Leaving the curtains partially open for this effect was a good idea.

The same cannot be said, however, for the sound effects in this scene. The sudden gusts of wind and rain on the opening of the window followed by just as sudden silence appeared to be very artificial - even more so when such a gust arrived when the window had not been opened. A muted wind backing throughout this scene would have worked better dramatically. The opening burst of thunder lost its effect through the quality of the sound - it sounded like a lavatory cistern, which impression was supported by the following entrance of the Judge. The only sound effect which really worked for me was the taped voice of the opening scene, which was clear and had all the desired impact.

The costumes were well-selected with an eye for contrast as well as appropriateness to each of the characters. Collectively they gave a sense of the period in which the play is set and to which the characters belong.

All that has so far been said about performances and the staging are of course comments on Ted Sandy's production, the producer being responsible for all. In most plays, but particularly in thrillers, the first Act is most important. Not only does it need to break the ice and engage the audience, but it also contains the exposition. The latter often poses the problem of a very static first Act, and this certainly applies, in this play. It opens with activity in that all ten main characters, plus the red herring in the form of Narracot are introduced in a very short space of time. Thereafter comes the exposition in which we are given the basic information about the situation and the characters - the static part. To combat this the production must grip our interest, which this one failed to do. The answer does not lie in movement for the sake of movement, which is purposeless. There was in this first Act a great deal of meaningless movement from many of the characters to the extent that they were often 'twittering' about the stage instead of 'using' it. This continued through the whole of the Act, which still remained static. The cast generally did not achieve effective and interesting contrasts in these early stages and some characters lost credibility in their efforts to establish their individuality. The necessity was recognised but the means used to meet it were either inappropriate or mishandled.

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In Act II, Scene 1, when the suspense needs to mount, the pace was much too even and pedestrian, and any illusion that had been achieved was repeatedly shattered by several prompts. The advent of a mystery voice from outside the room over-complicated the plot unnecessarily!! In addition, mutual suspicion was not established and therefore the tension - the vital ingredient - was missing. There were other impediments which accumulated to prevent the audience from believing what was happening. The dumbshow and ad-libbing never worked. For instance, Rogers spent some time miming an unheard chat to the General on the balcony, but for some unknown reason he suddenly became audible on his final line when he said, "Breakfast is ready, sir" - which would more likely have been his opening rather than his closing statement (a reason for approaching the General in the first place!). This element of artificiality was capped by the General himself after his death, when, having impressively retained absolute stillness for quite a time, he moved his legs to let the rest into the room!

It was not until the end of Act II, Scene 2, as the plot thickens, that the play began to hold any interest for me, but any development was by now being built on such unsound foundations that success in any form was bound to be limited. Against this background, Act III held the most interest. The scene in darkness worked well, but needed tightening up. In Scene 2, the dialogue between Philip and Vera established an excellent pace, but the latter's revelation and agitation were very forced and artificial - it was imposed rather than coming from within the actress. Generally, the dialogue needed pointing more, including the moments of humour which occur.

Having made several adverse comments about the pace of the production, I perhaps need to be a little more precise. Ted had clearly recognised the need for a fast pace in order to keep the play moving. This was there for much of the time, and the cast generally were sharp on their cues apart from the prompts. I must therefore stress that the fault lay not in slowness of pace but in evenness of pace. Keep a fast pace constant and it eventually becomes counterproductive, simply because sameness in any area creates monotony. What was needed here was variety within the pace - but not haphazard variety for the sake of itself. It needs to be carefully plotted and integrated with the timing so that the build-up to a high spot of tension and the relief of tension that must inevitably follow is orchestrated as the play moves from climax to anticlimax to climax.

On the assumption that this was Ted's first production (and I hope that he will forgive me if I am wrong), there is much in the way of basic theatrecraft that he can learn from it. The conclusions to be drawn from the performance that I saw are that he made a determined effort to keep the play moving and was rightly concerned about visual appearance of characters and setting and about effects, but that he left the dialogue, the tension, the timing and the characterisations to look after themselves. In this way he neglected the major responsibilities of a producer. There is no point in impressing an audience with effects if he failed to interest it in either the people in the play or in the situation in which they find themselves. If in this kind of play, he fails to evoke a burning desire in the audience to know 'whodunit', even if they do feel cheated by the contrived ending, the production cannot possibly succeed at any level. He can only do this by ensuring that the audience can 'believe' what they see and hear, if only for the duration of its happening.

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