

A ROYAL TRIUMPH FOR HDC

BENNETT'S PLAY PROVES A MAD SUCCESS

Just as Huntingdon Drama Club seemed destined to perform this highlight of the Alan Bennett canon, so I seemed destined to review it. My History teacher asked me to portray George III in an O level lesson about 50 years ago and I chose the, possibly apocryphal, incident when George shook 'hands' with a tree believing it to be the King of Prussia whilst my best friend portrayed Pitt on his deathbed saying that he thought he could eat one of Bellamy's veal pies.

George's madness provides excellent theatrical fodder, whether humorous or tragic, in this marvellous play and director Mark Hebert took the opportunity to delight us with a wonderfully ambitious rendition of this piece which remains true to the regal and political turmoil of the times whilst giving us an insight into the heart and mind of a much misunderstood monarch.

Farmer George is remembered for losing us the colonies but was a well read, intellectual and politically astute King when not suffering from the porphyria that caused his 'madness.' It is easy to see modern parallels in much of the play including many not present when Bennett wrote it in 1991: 'the state of monarchy and the state of lunacy share a frontier.'

A simple setting comprising rostra and boxes with a screen upstage projecting images of Windsor and Kew and so on was beautifully effective and provided a wholly appropriate backdrop for Jonathan Clift's stupendous costumes: from the spectacular closing 'portrait' in ermine through the polarised golds and monochromes, these were bespoke clothes fit for a King and simply the best I have seen in any amateur production. Brilliant!

Alongside an array of absolutely authentic props (I feel that I ought to be giving the chamber pot a review of its own) provided by Wendy Chappell and excellent sound and lighting effects by Mel Pugsley and Kimberley Stokes, the backstage and front of house team ensured that HDC's professional standards were upheld. I loved the image used on poster and programme with the 'ghost' of the straitjacket used to restrain George.

Performances were of the first order. The ensemble worked fantastically well as a company and the decision to play 'gender blind' was inspired. It created some spirited portrayals and opportunities for talented actresses.

At the centre of it all was a tour de force by Dean Laccohee as George. He was everything he needed to be and more: showing the King at his intellectual but humane best and with his spirit almost broken by the medical tortures, his descent and ascent was a theatrical pleasure to watch. Here was acting in all its truth and showmanship and technique. A veritable masterclass. Bravo!

Dean was ably supported by some terrific character performances. I was particularly taken with Milton Travesty as a slimy, effete Prince of Wales but Les Roberts as an increasingly frustrated Pitt was also outstanding. Josephine Hussey's loving Queen Charlotte was most touching whilst Abi Pearson was

truly skillful in her portrayal of Thurlow and Caroline Monkman played one of the most challenging parts, that of Lady Pembroke, with poignancy.

Others lying in wait or actively working towards George's demise whether in the guise of his children: Guy Makey as the Duke of York or his so called physicians Michelle Gibson as Baker and Mike Plews as Warren or Pitt's opponents: Jonathan Salt as Fox and Andy Wilkes as Sheridan were uniformly excellent and very believable. They spoke to us and it felt as though we had been transported to an eighteenth century that felt modern and topical.

One of the highlights for me and a performance that , if pitched wrongly, ruins the play was the playing of James Rowe as Willis. A terrific and unselfish performance that centred the production when George was at his lowest point and when his hysteria can be overwhelming.

Apologies for not mentioning every single performance as all were excellent but rest assured that all were appreciated in a very large and effective company.

A long first half of 75 minutes went by as though it were five minutes and the second half also whizzed by propelled by the pace of Mark Hebert's adept direction and the drive of the actors' energy.

If I was forced to a constructive criticism I would say that , occasionally, pick up of cues was a little slow but this was balanced by fast and seamless scene changes, clever choice of musical excerpts, from Handel's back catalogue mainly of course, and a relentless pace overall.

This is a notoriously difficult play for an amateur group to present and here we saw something rather wonderful brought to fruition by the progressively exceptional Huntingdon Drama Group. One of the highlights of my tenure as a NODA rep, I thank everyone who contributed in any way to this superb production.

Sandra Samwell

NODA rep

District 1 East