

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

AYCKBOURN FINDS A HOME IN HUNTINGDON

Following a period of neglect, Alan Ayckbourn has seen both a revival of interest and new audiences for his masterpieces. Although the master himself has been revisiting former triumphs, the efforts of excellent societies such as Huntingdon Drama Club must have helped tremendously because when you find a group who not only understand the many layers of this brilliant playwright but can translate that understanding into terrific performances which run the gauntlet from tragedy to high farce with consummate ease, you know that you are in for a treat.

And such it was on the final night of a highly successful run of 'Neighbourhood Watch' at the Commemoration Hall in Huntingdon.

Following a warm welcome by HDC's front of house team, my NODA Youth adviser companion and I were entertained by a very funny but thought provoking play with many contemporary references to the 'state of England.' Judging by director Dean Laccohee's excellent programme notes, this was aided by his profound insight into Ayckbourn and his own experience of being in a significant selection as well as the process the actors went through. Dean directed this play about a small neighbourhood watch scheme turning to urban war with great skill and aplomb.

The suburban backdrop (part of the director and Nat Spalding's interesting setting), effective lighting and sound by Edd Welsh and Mel Pugsley, thoroughly appropriate costumes courtesy of Ann Monk and excellent props from Wendy Chappell were stage managed seamlessly by Guido Paoluzi Cusani and Nat Spalding. All provided a wonderful context for the calm before the storm, the angst and the mayhem that was to follow... and the laughs.

However serious the themes, the underlying tragedy and the gathering storms, one cannot forget the laughs in such a play. The audience were hard work on Saturday night: one of those crowds who enjoy but keep it within...but that happens and usually a quick upturn of pace can address the issue. Probably my only small gripe is that the pace was a little too steady for such a long play, coupled with the fact that Mr Ayckbourn himself needed to cut around 20 minutes from the play. My personal view and constructive criticism is that the set, particularly the furniture lay-out, limited the physicality of the play and led to too much being played to the front, but I can see why others would disagree!

That being said, the individual acting performances were superb.

Dean Laccohee in what might have been dubbed the Richard Briers part of Martin and Josephine Hussey as his miserable, multi layered sister Hilda provided the heart of the piece perfectly. We thought we knew them from the off, but they changed and their years of sibling

claustrophobia was revealed as scenes passed. Despite 'knowing' the end from Hilda's opening eulogy, the denouement was shocking. This was top class playing from both actors.

The other three females contrasted beautifully: Caroline Molony was a totally believable Dorothy with a brilliant miscellany of reactive looks, Jo Travers-Brown provided many of the laughs with some fabulous comic timing in her exquisite take on the predatory Amy whilst Sarah Jane Charlton's Magda was a master class in subtlety and underplaying for reality. Her monologue was superb. All three were thoroughly truthful and believable.

As were the three men: Andrew Grannell as Gareth, Richard Fitt as Rod and Phil Green as Luther. Andrew gave us a most endearing interpretation which grew in stature as the play progressed whilst you wanted to strangle Richard's Health and Safety bore from the 'off.' He produced many of the first act's laughs because his delivery of lines was 'spot on.' Phil was a very angry Luther... and a spectacularly spluttering finesse he brought to the part. Again, all three were precisely in tune with the play's intentions.

All in all, this was a marvellously eloquent and .dare I say, moving rendition of one of the lesser known pieces in the Ayckbourn canon. HDC should be proud of themselves for putting such a fine interpretation onto a stage which was not entirely ideal for such a play...a theatre in the round being a better setting than a traditional stage, probably. This did not detract from a terrific performance that really matched up to HDC's aim of producing high quality community theatre. This was high quality...and then some. Bravo!

I look forward to 'The Madness of George 111' in the spring of 2016.