

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD
FULL-LENGTH FESTIVAL 2014-2015

Group: Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Production: Something Wicked written and directed by Ian Lodge

Venue: Wickham Bishops Village Hall

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen, accompanied by Jenny Burke, (Friday April 10, 2015)

INTRODUCTION:

What a lot of hard work must have gone into this production – and all for just two nights.

I can understand the reasons – an unknown, new play, in a large hall. Better to have decent audiences in for two shows than a smattering across three or four nights. The downside of the short run is that the cast don't get a really good go at it in front of an audience, but Jenny and I both felt that the piece had been well-rehearsed to forestall any problems.

We congratulate the group and Ian Lodge on carrying this project through and agreed that Ian has a flair for dialogue. The plot of *Something Wicked* is also intriguing: A drama group is rehearsing *Macbeth* but seem to fall foul of the play's legendary curse.

The result was a comedy thriller with an amusing and clever twist at the end, based on the premise that "What's done CAN be undone".

I did feel that making Wickham Bishops Drama Club itself the subject of the play, struck the one slightly "amateurish" note. A totally fictitious club would have felt more innovative. I can't quite explain why but that's the way it is. At least the actors didn't have their own names or bear much resemblance to these mainly flawed characters!

We're sure that the real Wickham Bishops Drama Club is always much closer to perfection this close to the run. Their fictitious counterparts were clearly nowhere near ready for their public.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

A typically efficient and warm WB welcome, complete with much appreciated interval coffee.

The simple but well-illustrated programme (it made a striking poster!) told us all we needed to know about the premise of the drama. It also warned of the adult themes.

SETTING & PROPS:

The castle set was, we assumed, supposed to be the group's not-quite-finished set, as it was very barely dressed. Fair enough, as we hadn't yet reached production week and most sets go up with only days to spare.

The cauldron was splendid, complete with dummy arm and log fire below, while the blood red chairs and throne provided a splash of symbolic colour.

The various knives were well handled and crucial to the whodunnit element of the plot.

LIGHTING & SOUND:

Good work from the technical team, who combined their light and sound plot with quite alarming thunder and lightning.

We had effective mood lighting underlining the action and picking out the characters when appropriate (such as the witches stirring their cauldron). The pre-show warm glow on the red tabs, combined with powerful orchestral music, evoked a premonition of murderous intent.

At one point, of course, we were plunged into darkness after the slaying of "Banquo."

This recorded music sounded wonderful in the hall, and the sound effects from thunder to little footsteps (not sure they fitted the mood) to the amplified ghost's voice were clear and on cue.

COSTUME:

Modern day costume is a great blessing in many ways, and the cast wore smart casual gear, augmented by the men's kilts (again with symbolic red) and the black hooded capes of the witches.

Malcolm the director was differentiated, with his slim-fitting black jeans and emerald waistcoat and neckscarf – very appropriate attire.

PERFORMANCES:

The final scene where time had been turned back to "undo" a murder, saw all the cast as the versions of themselves that they could have turned out to be in their parallel lives. All six cast members played this twist with pace, self-belief and humour – nice work!

ANNE: Pauline Roast, like all the cast, performed with conviction, so we were able to feel involved in the unfolding calamities. Attractive woman, neglected wife, two-timed lover and useful actress – that was Anne, and Pauline let all these elements unfold. Her alternative self – sappy over Malcolm, was amusingly played.

LIZ: Linda Burgess brought an appealing naivety to Liz, another of Steve's playthings. I did find Linda's voice too high at times, but her character swung from melting sweetness to fierce revenge with alarming credibility. Amusing stuff with the dummy arm!

SALLY: This is the sensible, warm-hearted, motherly one, but Sally is also a very capable actress, as Ann Hewitt demonstrated with her own very watchable performance. The whole audience relished Ann's fierce rant of impossible solutions, interrupted by a pause and : "...OR..." Very well-timed!

MALCOLM: As the arty, precious, temperamental director, who has tricked the group into staging his favourite drama, Jack Williams flounced and pleaded, as he desperately tried to turn this crumbling cast into a Shakespearian company by opening night. The tension showed from the start and his Act Two hysteria was entertaining. We loved the contrast of Malcolm's alternative self (a scruffy young man who, by giving way to the others' objections to staging Macbeth, prevents him from being a killer).

JOHN: Normally, it's a bad idea for the director (let alone writer AND director!) to also appear on stage, but somehow Ian Lodge pulled it off, despite the fact that his assistant director was ALSO on stage. The cuckolded husband and staunch group member later became Steve's gay partner in their "other life" which was nicely played with no signs of OTT camp.

STEVE: Good work from Graham Pipe as Steve, the stocky Don Juan of the drama group. It would have been good, dramatically, if more realistic raunchiness had been suggested between Steve and the two mistresses. As it was, this was as innocent as a 1960s farce. But Graham came into his own as the ghost, with a stentorian voice one minute, and the next, urgent pleas to John to help undo his gory fate. His frustration at trying to convince John of his paranormal state was credible, as was his total lifestyle change as a gay man in the parallel world.

DIRECTION & SUMMARY

Considering Ian was on stage, the blocking was pretty good. There was occasionally a line of characters, but generally the actors' positions had been "staggered" quite well, with attention to sitting, standing, leaning, crossing the stage etc. At one point we could see moving feet, beneath the closed tabs, while furniture was shifted, and felt that the curtains hadn't needed to be closed.

The pace was good, and the production seemed well-rehearsed (in contrast to the fictitious cast).

Everyone took the story seriously in its dramatic scenes, and this didn't jar with the black humour which formed the other vital component of this new play. It just added to the eccentricity of the piece. Jenny and I both felt drawn in to the action, eager to see what on earth was going to happen next.

Whether or not the play has any life beyond Wickham Bishops is hard to predict, but well done to Ian for conceiving this quirky and refreshing new play. We enjoyed the evening.

With thanks

Liz Mullen