

Wickham Bishops Drama Club
Friday 12th April
Restless Spirits
Written and Directed by Graham Pipe

NODA ADJUDICATION

I was lucky enough to be invited along to report on a production written and directed by a group member of the Wickham Bishops Drama club. Having been through this myself, I know the pressure one can feel when developing an idea from the seeds of a story and nurturing it into a script, filling out the depths of the characters, adapting the storyline and finally the first read-through. You are open to judgement, constructive criticism, but also encouragement and you can be surprised at the support you receive. Upon watching this show on its premier night, I can see Graham had the support from a strong band of theatre lovers who were as determined as he was to see it a success.

The heavy stage curtains were flooded in light from behind as the eerie music drew us in as we were bathed in a blood red glow from the stage. The curtains slowly revealed a Victorian parlour, adorned with exactly what one would expect; an oversized dining table draped in lace, large items of furniture lining the walls, which were painted in wine red and dark green. In the centre of the room sat at the table was Madame Edie Ochre, wearing a shimmering dress with dramatic sleeves and flowing, tightly curled hair which gave her a huge presence in a large room. Madame Ochre, played by Pauline Roast, was perfectly cast - with wide, staring eyes in the distance, an air of mystery and an other-worldly aura about her being. With her shrill bell she constantly summoned her niece or house keeper to attend to her every will.

Her niece, Sylvia, played by Leigh Perry, was the patient and abiding guide throughout the evening – always slightly overlooked, her presence never really valued by Madame Ochre's forthcoming guests who were soon to arrive, as it was indeed not her (or so they thought) that they had come to visit. Her crucial role of the evening was later revealed. Sylvia had the task of caring for Bixby (Charlie Willett) who was the victim of the numerous unfortunate mishaps on the stage, which was always met with a curse and another bandage to add to his weary body. Bixby reminded me of Blakey – constantly grumbling, bumbling and held nothing but contempt for his position. His slapstick tumbles brought a lot of humour to the stage, and were well executed.

Christa Evans and Carol Blenkinsop soon joined us for a séance as Carol wanted to contact her departed husband regarding a missing fortune. Mrs Blenkinsop, played by Catherine Stott, portrayed a young broken-hearted wife with great sensitivity. Determined to convince her companion for the evening (Debbie Irby), the two had a lot to clash over which always makes for interesting viewing. It is only later revealed why she had not only scepticism but an overall disdain for being there – she was to be exposed. George and Isabelle De Vere (Ross McTaggart and Jordan Shynn) were also in clashes as to why they attended Madame Ochre's home – George to deliver financial papers, Isabelle to try and contact her departed son, who passed in tragic circumstances which she was trying to

come to terms with. The pair were fiery from the start, with Isabelle lording it over her debonair husband, dressed in a suit and attempting to maintain control over his 'ill' wife, but failing. Isabelle's drive later on became clear; she was a grieving mother, unsupported by George, who seemed to have better things to do than comfort her. The pair onstage, made a great couple to watch unravel.

The late arrivals, James Hood and Philip Brown (Nick Hewes and Stuart Latter) made an unusual pairing, which was again later revealed as to why they didn't seem to fit the bill with James's brash overconfidence and attempts to ridicule Madame Ochre and the whole situation, yet was there to support his 'friend' wanting to speak to his 'dead mother'.

The stage space was well used at the beginning, but became a little static as the séance and questioning began. It is difficult to introduce movement to such an occasion, and it was placed where it could; at one point the sceptics were one end of the table, the believers at the other, but with such a generous space I felt it could have been used more. The paranormal bell ring ringing was used to good effect, as was the changing voice to determine when Madame Ochre was channelling the voice of a spirit, but I was hoping to be slightly more spooked with maybe a few more effects. The blackouts and sound effects were well timed, and the lighting was 'spot on'; gently lowered as the atmosphere drew in, barely noticeable, but just enough to increase the tension in the room.

I did struggle to place the actual era of the production, not because of the set, but more of the costumes of the characters. It was only when a kindle was mentioned that it satisfied my placing of the time this was set in.

It is difficult to ascertain so many characters' background stories without explanation, particularly when they are so crucial to the story. I am not here to critique the writing, but for the sake of the pace of the production, I felt maybe another eye cast over some of the lengthy dialogue on rare places would have been beneficial, but I also appreciate the depths in which I understood each character and their position in the story. Not an easy balance to maintain, without leaving the audience with further questions. However, my attention was kept throughout, and the twists and turns towards the end showed the talent in the writers storytelling, with some wonderful tension built in the second half, which led to some very tense stand-offs much to the audience's delight. I really did enjoy this show, and only wished more people would have the opportunity to see it. I hope Graham puts pen to paper once more after this successful first outing.

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