

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

FULL LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL 2017/18

GROUP: Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Venue: Village Hall

Production: A Spot Of Murder by Geoff Bamber

Date of adjudication: Fri April 13, 2018

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen, accompanied by Jennifer Burke

INTRODUCTION:

A lot of work for a two-night run, and we were there on the first night.

I had never seen this comedy whodunnit before, so was able to suspend my belief or disbelief and let the action unfold.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

As always, a very warm and proficient welcome from the smart staff – very solicitous over our interval coffees too. The programme gave us the vital information about cast and location.

The group had added a bit of fun with their guess-whodunnit questionnaires. Jenny and I were totally wrong!

SETTING & PROPS:

Usefully for any group, only one set was needed. But it was quite a grand home, so could still have been daunting. Here we had a good representation of the spacious living room of the remote home of fading diva. Corrina Marcham. and her artist husband, Felix.

The red tabs parted to reveal elegant but serviceable oak-like cabinets etc, cream walls with a coloured contrast below the dado, and lighter cream sofas.

Any likelihood of monotony was prevented by a sprinkling of red cushions. Wisely, there were two vast oriental fans on the upstage wall – which would have seemed an overwhelmingly vast space without them.

We were not quite sure if the action was set a couple of decades ago, or in the present day. The mobile phones seemed fairly modern so we assumed we were not too far off 2018, even though the saucy farce-like moments harked back to earlier times. Felix's large, gaudy portfolio holder also seemed up-to-date. I did feel that the doctor's bag was rather small.

Madam Zareza's tambourine was resoundingly successful - wielded with determination and impossible to ignore.

LIGHTING & SOUND:

Brooding music preceded the play, doorbells came on cue and we much appreciated the scrunching gravel effects!

Good interior lighting, moonlight from the French windows and some splendid blackouts. The use of torches by the two coppers was amusingly timed.

COSTUMES:

Corrina's delicate peachy pink ensemble was suitably fluttery for a woman of a certain age with an inflated notion of her own theatrical attributes. It suited Pauline very well. As her constant companion, the alleged Madam Zareza, Debbie had enormous fun sweeping around the stage, and the floaty green and gold kaftan, accessorised with headband, beads and bare feet, was perfect for the task. Good make-up too for both ladies.

Leigh is lucky to have the body to match her alluring role and the sexy skirt, shorts, blouse etc made her popularity very understandable. Fresh, modern make-up.

The young copper looked convincing, though I wonder how easy it was to find a uniform as tall as James. As his superior, DI Gareth Trench, Ross McTaggart looked at ease in the suit, while Felix's more arty attire was ideal for the character.

Mf..

Mrs Gaskell had the inevitable plain dress and pinafore but still managed to look as attractive as her role required. The vicar looked fine in his semi-off-duty attire and I assume Jordan, as the doctor, wore her own outfit.

The outstanding costume, perhaps, was that of the wildly theatrical Norton Peveril. His grey and fuchsia ensemble, complete with hat and cane was gloriously OTT. We liked his gold and black smoking jacket, worn as a dressing gown.

PERFORMANCES:

MRS MILDRED GASKELL: Linda Burgess always gives good value and she played Mrs Gaskell with discretion. An efficient, caring woman with a puzzling matrimonial history, this latter revelation was well-timed by Linda.

GLORIA TOWCESTER: Leigh Perry wore the sexy clothes with confidence and gave us a Gloria who flaunted her charms humorously and without apology. Her reactions were natural and unforced, although she dropped her volume from time to time. This big stage – in a big hall – needs chins up and good projection.

CORINNA MARCHAM: A real stereotypical diva – flouncing, posturing, swooning, and well-spoken. Splendid projection too. Pauline Roast ruled the roost, playing the part with ease and flair. She also played off her spiritual guru friend very well. The audience seemed temporarily taken aback to see her alive and well for the curtain call!

FELIX MARCHAM: Charlie Willett wisely didn't overplay this complex character. A rather Bohemian would-be artist, Felix had a troubled past but a secure relationship with Corinna. His sadness over her sudden demise was touching, even though everyone seemed to get over their loss quite speedily. But then, this is a comedy whodunnit.

Mf..

MADAM ZAREZA: Good work from Debbie Irby as the tambourine-bashing spiritual advisor with – inevitably – a hidden past. Debbie made the woman profoundly irritating and yet enjoyable to watch. Some of her expressions were priceless. Debbie worked well with Pauline, but still held her own long after her friend’s deadly departure.

I wasn’t sure if the wobbly yoga pose near the beginning was deliberate or not. It would have been fine if it was unintentional - as long as we knew it was unintentional for Madam Zareza - not just Debbie. After all, the woman is a fake.

DI GARETH TRENCH: We enjoyed the way Ross McTaggart played the D.I. It was real hands-in-pockets natural work and he could easily have slotted in to a more serious play in a similar role. As it was, his comedy was understated and all the more effective for it. His projection and the teamwork with his young colleague were very good, and the business with the torch well-timed.

PC DAVID PENDLEBURY: A lovely performance from James Milne as the slightly naïve but not stupid young copper. Gentle comedy without trying to be a police version of Pte Pike!

DR LOUISE FOSKETT: Brusque and without much of a bedside manner, Jordan Shynn’s doctor was not a character to warm to. Eventually that fact was justified – the Doctor dunnit! – but Jordan was careful to give nothing away too soon. She spoke out well.

NORTON PEVERIL: What a thoroughly enjoyable performance from Graham Pipe. Looking disarmingly like the present-day Michael Ball, and with all the theatrical boom of Simon Callow, this old-style thespian was a character who could afford to go pretty much OTT, yet still Graham sensibly held back from overdoing it.

His every word reverberated with overdramatic histrionics. When Norton makes the remark about his own gestures, it was spot on. Even the fingers of Graham’s raised left hand were all a-flutter. This was a consummate performance that took over the actor’s whole body. Needless to say, his projection was faultless too. Well done.

Mf..

REV ARTEMIUS SPRULE: A gentle character – perhaps deceptively so? No – he was innocent, but Nick Hewes left us room to wonder. Again, a relaxed, well-judged performance – not just a stock character vicar.

DIRECTION:

With this vast stage, Wickham Bishops Village Hall could be a blessing or a curse for directors, but Sue Matten used the space well. It has to be said that the pace occasionally lapsed and once or twice volume dropped, but the experienced and well-cast company (for that's how they came across) got things back to speed and showed good team work and interaction.

Sue had a collection of stereotypical comedy thriller characters but she seemed to have kept them on a gentle rein. Nobody went too far over the top, and the overall effect of this apparent control was a well-judged entertainment. Yes, it was occasionally daft, but we were drawn in, and came to care what happened and why.

SUMMARY

A Spot of Murder may not be the world's greatest comedy thriller, but this cast respected their characters which helped us to believe in them. Thank you for letting us share an amusing and entertaining production.

Liz Mullen

Adjudicator