

The Unexpected Guest, Wickham Bishops Drama Club Performed on April 14, 2012 at Wickham Bishops Village Hall

Director – Sue Matten

The dimming of the house lights, the introductory mood music and the few seconds of suspenseful waiting for the tabs to be pulled back created just the right atmosphere for this Agatha Christie “whodunnit”. The magnificent set, not just in quality but quantity too since the WB stage is anything but small, was complemented by furniture and ornaments that would have filled a large living room. Even those seeing this play for the first time must have guessed that the elegant lady holding the gun in the opening scene did not “do it” for that would have been too easy. Then which of the remaining six possible suspects (I discount the policemen) could have done so? As Christie’s plot unfolds we meet each of the potential murderers in turn and weigh up their motives and opportunities. One or two sub-plots unravel and a red herring is thrown our way but Old Testament justice is seen to be done as an ancient wrong is not only punished with the death of Richard Warwick but manages also to encompass the death of his son.

If the death of Jan Warwick is also part of the grand plan then we should perceive Michael Starkwedder as rather cold and calculating beneath the laid-back Prince Charming that is on display. This is a very difficult chameleon role to play since too much steel too early would alert the audience antenna whereas too much silk would not have credibility. On the whole Dafydd Bates captured this very well, treading the fine line between ultra-altruistic guest and enigmatic stranger until his final line. One can almost see him as a master puppeteer, pulling the strings of his marionettes as he creates alibis, dispenses drinks and sews his seeds of mischief. But perhaps this is to over-analyse. There is no doubt that Anne-Marie Latter as Laura Warwick and the most vulnerable of Starkwedder’s “victims” played the role of confused wife, loyal lover and loving step-mother very well. With good unaccented English and a strong range of emotions this role was well done.

Laura Kittle as Miss Bennett is developing into a fine actress, with an easy style and good stage presence. James Milne was excellent as the “challenged” Jan Warwick. Here was energy and demonstrative behaviour sufficient to justify his label but reined in enough to deliver a convincing performance. Len Howard was a very smooth Major Farrar, mature but with enough spark to stand up to the blackmailing threats from Jack Williams’ opportunist manservant, Henry Angell. Ian Lodge fit the bill as Inspector Thomas and the smaller roles of Mrs Warwick (Carol Munt) and Sergeant Cadwallader (Steven Barham) complemented a well-balanced cast.

If I had to make a constructive observation my sense was that Act One dragged a little and it wasn’t because of slow cue pick-ups. Possibly there was a lack of appreciation as to why character A or B had to enter the living room apart from being needed to deliver their lines. A greater sense of urgency or purpose for each character may have had an impact on body language and delivery. Act Two, in contrast, was good and pacy, perhaps because of the more obvious motivation that each character had as the denouement approached. This may be the play construction itself. Nevertheless, this was an entertaining and stylish evening from Wickham Bishops Drama Club.

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins, District 8, NODA East