

Society: Amateur Players of Sherborne

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Production: The Birthday Party

Author: Harold Pinter

Director: Bev Taylor-White

Date seen: Thursday 14th March 2019

SHOW REPORT

From the outset this production clearly evoked the atmosphere of the stifling ordinariness of a slightly seedy, seaside boarding house: the set itself was dressed in contemporary 1950s style, with further authentic details such as the newspaper, wrist-watch, glass pendant lightshade and Stanley's striped pyjamas. Add to this the Everley Brothers' hit 'All I Have to do is Dream' and the stage was perfectly set for Pinter's classic play.

'Atmospheric' is the term best used to describe this production of a play famous for its twists and turns, and we felt repeatedly the shifting of perspective as the actors invested each scene, each line, with truth and conviction. Petey (Richard Culham) and Meg (Gilly Savage) captured precisely the intimacy of a couple wrapped up in themselves and their stifling little world; from the moment she flung open the hatch and tapped a spoon on the cereal bowl, we witnessed the littleness of their existence and its isolation. The portrayal of Meg in particular was full of energy which did not drop throughout the performance, so that we believed in her entirely as she called on Petey to eat his cornflakes, as she watched his every move; as she flirted with Stanley, cajoled him into coming downstairs; fantasized about being the centre of attention; as she feared the arrival of two unknown guests. With so little action, Petey is a difficult character to play, but we fully understood his liking for a comfortable life, his ultimate distrust of the newcomers, his sincere (though apparently short-lived) concern for Stanley as he was led away, and the irony of his relief at their departure (having introduced them himself).

Lulu (Rachael Alexander) was a breath of fresh air, seemingly young and innocent, bringing a new dynamic to the house, as though opening a window on a brighter existence as she chatted with Meg and attempted to free Stanley from his mundane life, and finally her indignation at Goldberg. Stanley (Gary Brooks) was clearly a man in hiding, and perhaps more than most was hiding from himself. The transition from his sluggish, selfish, unpleasant character to a man on his guard was clear, with tension building through the shoulders to the eyes, a sense of panic, until we saw the final transformation to the broken man.

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Goldberg (David Weeks) and McCann (Joseph Travers) achieved a real sense of threat, which was all the more intimidating because it was under-played. Goldberg's deceptive and oily politeness barely concealed his manipulative and violent nature, whilst McCann's diatribe against Stanley revealed a mindless parroting of accusations, so that we wondered whether he was a proficient interrogator or socially and mentally deficient. With his blank expression and constant invasion of Stanley's personal space, McCann seemed truly dangerous.

The play itself is full of contradictions, confusion and ambiguity, but in this production, the strong direction and performance of the actors ensured that the audience remained engaged and intrigued throughout. Very well done, indeed.

Sylvia Coates
NODA Representative

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