

Society: APS: Amateur Players of Sherborne

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Production: Table Manners

Author: Alan Ayckbourn

Director: John Crabtree

Date seen: Monday 24th February 2020

SHOW REPORT

This production of 'Table Manners' was a Mad Hatter's Tea Party for adults, full of colourful characters, much changing of places (or partners) and a rollercoaster ride of hope, frustration, excitement and despair. After the bouncy, whimsical opening music, the story was clearly told, moved swiftly forward and the characters and their situations were well-established by the end of the first scene; the family dinner party was the highlight of the evening.

Diction was perfect and characters were strongly-drawn. Annie (Jane Pitts) displayed a range of emotions, each with truth and feeling: she made us aware of the dreariness of her existence; we saw that she harboured a secret; and once her romantic bubble had been burst, we felt the disappointment and resignation now that the charm of the adventure was lost; her anger with Norman seemed real and we shared her frustration at Tom's thick-skinned inadequacy and insensitivity. Sarah (Bev Taylor-Wade) was a very bossy, organised sister-in-law, reminiscent of Margot Leadbetter; disdain was her over-riding characteristic, especially regarding Ruth, so that we disliked her for poisoning Annie's dream of a romantic weekend and were annoyed at her smugness in arranging her own secret tryst with Norman. Ruth (Rachael Alexander) delivered every word with humour, meaning and energy; we felt the impact of her brutal honesty that 'None of us happen to like each other very much'; Ruth seemed not to regard Norman very seriously, and in dismissing him because of his shallow nature, treated him rather like a wayward pet. Reg (Richard Culham) was a classic cheeky chappie, perky, jolly and lively, the life and soul of the party; his energy was high throughout and he extracted every laugh offered in the text, delivering his lines to full effect. Norman (Cameron Thrower) was intensely and altogether irritating, annoying the other characters at every turn, so that we shared their frustration; his wagging finger was a notable irritant; completely self-centred, almost childish, Norman was horribly oily as he oozed his way round the table to make yet another conquest in Sarah. Tom (Roger Chadbourne) was most convincingly played: with his matter-of-fact

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manner, he was excellent at physicalizing his character: gauche and ineffectual, he bounced on the balls of his feet and his boxing moves were simply hilarious. On a low chair at the dining table, his movements seemed juvenile as he gazed around, never quite on the same wavelength as the adults, diminutive and diminished in every respect. Always out of step with what is going on around him, when Tom punched Norman in a sudden fit of chivalry, it was both funny and poignant.

Full use was made of the stage, which was built in country house style and dressed with props and furnishings consistent with a property occupied by several generations of the same family: the audience commented nostalgically on the salad cream and home-made carrot wine. The garden doors led to a well-planted conservatory, which was attractively lit to indicate both daytime and evening. Costume was appropriately low-key, befitting a brief weekend visit to the family home; Sarah's Alice band and pearls were perfect for the character, as was Annie's baggy jumper.

This was a tightly-directed production, with a cast of talented actors presenting an entertaining and thought-provoking evening. Congratulations to all involved.

Sylvia Coates
NODA Representative

Any observation made by the reviewer is based only on the performance in question. The NODA Representative's intention is to give an objective critique of the production overall and in particular the performance viewed. Any criticism expressed may not be valid at other performances, and is made only to encourage higher standards in Amateur Theatre.

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