

Society: Amateur Players of Sherborne
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Production: A Wife For All Reasons
Writer: Stephanie Easton
Director: Adrian Harding
Date seen: 17 January 2024

The core of this interesting play by Stephanie Easton, directed brilliantly by Adrian Harding, was a series of monologues, one from each of Henry VIII's wives, in which they presented their thoughts and feelings, often with strong emotion, about their relationship with the King. Each monologue had both variety and intensity and brought each Queen's character to life, and each was superbly delivered by the actor playing the role. Each one was discrete, a vignette. The unifying element was that each was a wife of Henry VIII, but there was an inherent risk in the format: a lack of traditional 'plot' or narrative 'flow' from one scene to the next, and the usual interactions between different characters, with the dramatic tension that produces. The author had addressed this by cleverly prefacing each vignette with a poem, whose lines and tenor then fed into and invigorated the Queen's speech which followed, creating a relationship, a sort of tension and frisson, between the passion of the poem and the passion in each Queen's presentation. Moreover the Director had creatively and masterfully brought unity and flow to the piece as a whole through the set, the use of music (sound design by Mark Lambert), the pacing, and the 'choreography' of the movement on stage. The reciters of the poems were in contemporary clothes, the Queens in Tudor dress, and the poems spanned the centuries from the 16th to the 19th, so there was a slight feeling of timelessness to the play.

As well as directing, Adrian Harding was Stage Designer (and reciter of two of the poems, and the programme designer, and it was a very good programme). The set was a masterpiece, with a red and black colour scheme that was both subtle, in particular elements, and striking overall. The chequerboard red and black floor was set off by the 'La Dame à la licorne' tapestry backdrop and there a simplicity and power in the stately chair on one side of the stage contrasting with the bench on the other, with candles hanging, mid-air, from wires.

A Narrator was used to 'set the scene' and Roger Chadbourne did this beautifully, in black tie. When he described the young prince dying the audience were moved and I heard several 'oh's and 'ah's. Robert Brydges read the first poem, 'I Am', with clarity and feeling before leading onto stage the first of the Queens, Catherine of Aragon. Tanya Ogden played her perfectly, with a very impressive Spanish accent and an engaging delivery which drew the audience in.

Adrian Harding recited Robert Herrick's 'To The Virgins' with great passion, emotion and expression. The 'gather ye rosebuds while ye may' ethos infused with its relevance the speech of Anne Boleyn which followed and Sally Matthews was excellent in the role, portraying a blend of winsomeness, knowingness, regret and determination. As with Catherine of Aragon, the first part was delivered standing, the second sitting down (on the bench, for Anne, contrasting with Catherine sitting on the stately chair).

Roger Chadbourne gave a very clear narration of the history of Jane Seymour, and this was followed by Christina Rossetti's 'Remember' – a powerful and moving poem read powerfully and movingly by Jessica Colson. As with all the poems, it related interestingly to the story and the emotions of the character it introduced, and Bethany Yates gave a riveting performance as that character, Jane Seymour, hallucinating on the verge of death after giving birth to Edward. Cradling the baby, she spoke to him with great emotion and pathos, and portrayed sickness and frailty with great skill and subtlety. This scene also contained an interaction of characters, with a Lady-in-Waiting, played by Anne-Marie Harvey with a graceful, calm solicitude, coming in to

take the baby away and, later, bringing on a cloth and a bowl of water to soothe the Queen's forehead. The red candles on the table, alight with a remarkably realistic flame effect, were a nice touch.

The second half opened, after a snatch of Greensleeves, with the narrator explaining about Thomas Cromwell ending up being beheaded, and then a great recitation of Kipling's 'If', without script. This gave an element of humour to the play, with the delivery of its opening line 'If you can keep your head when all about you/Are losing theirs' and the humour continued in Anne of Cleves' monologue. It was a wry humour which Bev Taylor-Wade gave to the role, in lines such as 'he couldn't cut my head off, I was no Anne Boleyn, I was a German Princess' and she combined this with a clever and convincing portrayal of an array of characteristics: authority ('I will die as I have lived – my own woman'), being sad and tired but not bitter, and a slight smugness as she recollected, with a satisfied smile, having been given Hever Castle. It was a neat and effective device of the writer to have Anne explain about Kathryn Howard having an affair with Thomas Culpeper, helping to set up the next scene, but this was the one scene in which I was beginning to wonder about the use of the poem, with Anne apparently commenting on the relevance of the poem herself as she said 'I did meet with triumph and disaster and treated those two imposters just the same'.... 'I did hear myself called a liar'.... 'I did lose all at one toss and never breathed a word about my loss'.... 'I have kept my virtue and can walk with kings and princes.' But just as I was beginning to wonder about this, Bev Taylor-Wade (and the playwright) turned it around with a delightful touch of humour by saying, with a dead-pan delivery and perfect timing 'I have filled many unforgiving minutes... I have enjoyed gardening'

Following on from 'How Do I Love Thee' recited by Jessica Colson, and an atmospheric playing of Did You Not Hear My Lady/Silent Worship, Hazel Parrett gave a really strong performance as Kathryn Howard in the Tower of London on the eve of her execution; young, emotional, angry with Henry, but trying to keep her dignity as a Howard. She describes herself as a 'young, giddy girl' and, with an energetic performance, an intensity and contemporary slang lines like 'he was still easy on the eye' Hazel Parrett clearly showed that she was 'giddy' but also that she had a serious, self-reflecting side to her character. She also showed, in her acting, the truth behind Kathryn's assertion of being besotted with Thomas Culpeper, and if at times the words seem to tumble out of her at speed, that was a reflection of the speed and intensity of her thought and feeling.

Another recitation full of emotion, expression and passion by Adrian Harding, this time of 'Green Groweth The Holly' by Henry VIII, set the scene for the final Queen, Catherine Parr, with her sad story of having really loved Thomas Seymour but through necessity having married Henry. Rosi Castle really brought out the sadness and was very convincing in the role. She was totally invested in the character, showing to the audience that she believed what she was saying and that she had, as she claimed 'always been strong willed'. She held the audience with a piercing gaze out towards us, defiant and almost challenging, and then looked downwards in a poignant contrast of demeanour.

The play closed fittingly with all six Queens and the Lady-in-Waiting reciting the final poem, 'When We Two Parted' by Lord Byron. It was a stunning ending to a powerful, thoughtful and moving production. The play of monologues worked really well on the small stage and intimate setting of the Sherborne Studio Theatre and the Lighting Design by Adrian Hole, assisted by Nick Baker, was simple but very effective; as with the blue lighting used in the night-time Tower of London scene. A special mention must definitely go to the costumes produced by Helen Smith – absolutely astounding – and congratulations to Mark Lambert and John Crabtree who assisted Adrian Harding with the realisation of the amazing set. A brilliant production all-round, as was attested by the very positive reactions of the audience. Well done to all involved in it!

Martin Stephen

[Representative, District 11, South West Region](#)
[National Operatic and Dramatic Association](#)

National Operatic and Dramatic Association

15 The Metro Centre, Peterborough PE2 7UH

Tel 01733 374 790 **Fax** 01733 237 286 **Email** info@noda.org.uk **Web** www.noda.org.uk

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