



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne (APS)
Name of Production: Theft
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Date: Wednesday 5th June 2024
Adjudicator: Tash Moore

This is the second time that APS have staged Eric Chappell's 1995 comedy, *Theft*. Director Jessica Colson played Barbara in the group's 1999 production and comments in the programme how the comedic style of the play has withstood the test of time. True to Chappell's familiar style, themes of class differences, adultery and social politics feature. Chappell expertly navigated murkier political waters by subtly examining social themes without being overtly provocative, with characters that are warm, witty and relatable. These characters feel real, usually with social aspirations and delusions of grandeur. There is much fun to be had as the punchlines are plentiful and the comedy often borders the ridiculous, much as one would expect from a situational comedy.

Chappell wrote for both stage and screen, with some television shows starting life in the form of a play and then being adapted for screen, and vice versa. Therefore, there's no surprise that *Theft* has the feel of a TV sitcom on stage as a situational farce that resonates with an audience who fondly remember Chappell's TV hits such as *Rising Damp*, *Duty Free* and *Only When I Laugh*.

This play, as a single-location piece calls for a resident set that was neatly accommodated in the society's theatre. It was an excellent choice in terms of staging, casting and a style that appealed to the audience demographic, who in turn thoroughly enjoyed an evening of light and humorous entertainment.

SET AND STAGING

The '*large drawing room*' of John and Barbara's house was effectively created on the small stage at this charming Studio Theatre in Sherborne. The walls were painted a light blue with white coving to match the Adam fireplace. An attractive archway featured upstage left, leading to two doors that provided access to other areas in the house such as the study, kitchen and garden. There was another door stage right that provided a further entry point to the playing space. The low bay window, complete with compartment seating was stage right, with lovely foliage dressing seen through the glass. A sizeable bookcase placed upstage housed leatherbound volumes, and secreted the all-important safe behind the faux collection of Britannica Encyclopaedias. The construction of the safe was ideal, with a push button mechanism to open the panel concealing it. I don't know how you managed to time the opening of the safe with Trevor's departure, but it was absolutely perfect!

The focal pieces of furniture included a chenille green-blue sofa placed stage left, and a striped fabric regency-style chair that was positioned stage right. The beige carpet covering the staging area matched the heavy gold curtains, and a sizeable patterned dark red rug also featured. In the upstage left corner a practical upright drinks cabinet was readily available for frequent visits throughout the course of the play. Light features included a chandelier and two attractive ornamental table lamps, and various paintings were hung on the walls. Numerous props were laid out on the four side tables, and a magazine rack sat next to the sofa. All of these details, many of which were suggested in the script, were finely observed and it was wonderful to read in the programme that much of the furniture was on loan from St Margaret's Hospice. The pieces were mostly in keeping with both the period (1995) and character (Barbara's taste, rather than John's!)

As the play opened, the scene was disrupted to suggest a break-in; strewn cushions, a fallen chair, books and greetings cards scattered on the floor, pictures hanging at an angle and drawers left open. Many of these misplaced items were corrected by various characters throughout the course of the evening. In a pre-show blackout, Spriggs was visibly seen getting into the seating compartment under the bay window (of course, there was no way around this) but it was highly amusing when audience members had indeed forgotten that he was here when he revealed himself later in the first scene! The three onstage doorways were well utilised throughout, and given the scale and grandeur of this country house, it made sense to have one door being access to a variety of further spaces. From the offset, with Trevor entering stage right and John meeting him from stage left, the three doors were used to consistently to construct the reality of the wider property. These two characters set to work straightening up the mess, starting with the chair and sofa for practical purposes, as to provide easy access to these seating areas early in proceedings.

Sensible blocking choices were made throughout, as all movements were motivated by intent. Pictures were created with consideration to both placement and level (namely, those sitting vs. those standing). For example, early in Act I, Scene 1 whilst discussing Barbara's drinking, Jenny was perched on the arm of the sofa opposite Trevor who was sat in the bay window, with John standing between them. Characters did often perch on the arm of the sofa which didn't look entirely natural. Presumably this spot was favoured so the actors could easily engage with someone sat on the chair, but perhaps a smaller sofa that was angled differently may have helped here. I really liked the addition of John and Jenny embrace as soon as they were left alone together on stage, therefore emphasising this storyline. Jenny's determined walk across to Trevor when vouching for his character made her feelings towards both her husband and Barbara clear, and when the couple then sat together in the bay window, they formed an idealistic picture of a seemingly happy couple. It was nice for characters to find solitary moments of reflection, for example when Jenny moved to the downstage left corner to regale the story about the book stall.

In Act II, effectual pictures were also created. The opening image had impact and neatly summarised the story thus far, with Spriggs now slumped in a chair being attended by Jenny sat on the floor, Trevor standing behind him looking concerned, John restless behind the sofa and Barbara looking typically unimpressed on the sofa. Another memorable moment was when a triangle was formed between John (stage left), Trevor (stage right) and Spriggs (upstage centre point) as Spriggs dripped poison into Trevor's ear about how John cheated in their tennis matches, using this distraction to successfully escape once more. In the final scene, positioning Spriggs behind the curtain provided ample opportunity for the character to frequently unveil himself and throw comedic looks to the audience in response to the conversations he was overhearing.

At times, pace did inhibit the impact of the sharply witty dialogue, such as discussions around the Bradford gang in the first scene. However, moments of tension were suitably crafted and held, such as when Spriggs revealed Jenny's locket. Both Jenny and John looked inconspicuously guilty, Barbara

was seen observing them suspiciously, Trevor was totally clueless and Spriggs was loving every moment of the chaos and disruption he was creating. Another moment that played out well was in the final scene where John was giving Spriggs an ultimatum with a countdown, halted by Spriggs' final truth bomb. The sense of unease simmered in the background and rose to another peak when John went a second time to shoot Spriggs, only to be diffused by Trevor's loud intervention, which was delivered with impact by the actor. The final sequence in which Spriggs was seemingly having an angina attack flowed nicely, with each moment marked clearly. From Spriggs clutching at his inhaler to scrambling for his pills only to spill these across the floor, with Trevor and John clumsily trying to help, concluding with a dramatic collapse face-down onto the rug. The pace and execution of movement here was perfect.

Characterisations and relationships between various characters were considered and conveyed both vocally and physically, with an observation of posture, body language, status and accent. John made good use of his physicality such as holding tension in his shoulders, particularly in moments of anger or when attempting to intimidate Spriggs with the pistol. By contrast, Barbara held a very commanding and upright posture, thereby demonstrating her calm and controlled demeanour. The dynamic between the two couples contrasted nicely. Barbara and John were celebrating their 30-year wedding anniversary but by the top of Act II, Scene 2 things were far from rosy. Throughout the play both the characterisations and the blocking aided the audience's understanding of the significant differences between these two couples, and indeed how the dynamics in their respective relationships changed as the story progressed.

PROPS

As per the set, the script provides very helpful suggestions on what to include, and again this team responded well to these ideas. The set dressing included cushions to match the furniture, two attractive table lamps, a telephone, a potted plant, a pleasant flower arrangement on one table and another in the fireplace, various books and magazines, some wedding anniversary cards and bottles of drinks in the cabinet. I especially enjoyed the attention to detail that Barbara would have made, such as the decorative plate on top of the cabinet. And the small statuette was small but suitable garish in style. Personal props included John's old army pistol and Barbara's diamond and sapphire butterfly brooch. Spriggs had an asthma inhaler, a striped paper bag of sweets and a bottle of pills. The 90s mobile phone secreted in the pot plant aptly represented the period the piece was set in.

COSTUMES

John and Trevor appeared in versions of a lounge suit with John in brown and Trevor wearing navy. John's pink shirt and purple dot tie added splashes of vibrancy to his outgoing personality whereas Trevor was a little more reserved in his blue and white shirt. Jenny wore a well-tailored black and cream patterned dress and a jacket that was only worn for her first entrance. The look was finished with a pearl necklace and black court heel shoes. Barbara was, as per the script's suggestion, dressed in an elegant and expensive black sequinned evening dress with a matching bolero jacket and black PVC heels. Her neat bob haircut suited the character and the statement necklace, jewelled earrings and various bracelets added further glamour. Spriggs, however appeared in a sad-looking beige trench coat worn over a white shirt (pre-set with port stains for Act II), a multi-coloured red and orange tie, brown suedes with contrast laces and comedic pink marigolds for his initial appearance.

SOUND

In this small (yet perfectly formed) space there were no significant problems with volume thanks to the company's clear diction and projection. Comedy musical interludes separated the scenes, and although they were not needed to cover a set change, they were well-placed as scenes typically concluded with a comedic climax. Therefore, these musical interludes elevated the mood, adding

comedic punctuation to a section of the story before moving on to the next. Pre-recorded sound effects were used to deliver pistol shots from the garden and the pistol being fired whilst being on the catch, whereas the banging offstage during the final scene was created live.

LIGHTING

Being a single-location story over the course of one evening, the number of states required were limited. The coverage was good, with just one black hole by the two upstage left doors. However, this was not an issue as no one was featured here whilst talking, except when in transit. The overhead chandelier featured throughout three-quarters of the play. It brightened significantly during Jenny and Trevor's first exchange and I am not sure if this was due to a cue being late, or indeed to mark that someone had turned more lights on at this point in the story. The central table lamp offered some warmth to the scene, but the matching counterpart stage right wasn't switched on, no doubt to add clarity to the 'exterior' lights. The blue lights outside the bay window effectively suggested that it was night time. For Act II, Scene 2 which took place a couple of hours later, the chandelier was taken out and the white lights were replaced with yellow and turquoise to suggest that dawn was imminent.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

No set changes were required. A few props were struck or pre-set between scenes such as the bottle at the end of the first scene, closing the safe at the end of Act II, Scene 1 and setting a drink ahead of Act II, Scene 2. These were well-managed by the crew and of course, what the audience does not see is how hard this team works behind the scenes, not just during the run but also in rehearsals.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Trevor Farrington

Richard Culham's well-meaning, easy going, chatty and upbeat Trevor was relatable and warm. The comedy was heightened by lively vocal intonations such as on '*we'll have to send the dogs up*' and the comedy '*ahhh!*'s in the changing by the window anecdote. His sheepish admission that he smelt of cheap after-shave provoked titters from the audience. The lightness and positivity of this character shone through. He delighted at taking the pistol from John, suggesting that maybe it had been some time since he yielded any form of power, and he lit up with a beaming smile after kissing Barbara. He was a devoted friend to John who was endlessly impressed by his friend's accomplishments, meanwhile constantly downplaying his own. His naivety was also played nicely, as he fervently defended John against Spriggs' various accusations and was manipulated with relative ease by Spriggs later when talking about John's acts of extortion. Later when Barbara shared John's true feelings of Trevor, he was in denial that any of it could be true. His hapless and clumsy remarks about Barbara's age were innocent, and his attempt at flirtation with her was comedically awkward. There was a harmonious relationship between Trevor and Jenny, until he was flummoxed by her suggestion of making a false insurance claim. In his eyes she could do no wrong, but suddenly he was perplexed and frustrated by what she was saying, including her use of language (John's favourite word...) and surprising declaration that she wanted Botox and to dye her hair blonde. She was starting to become someone he didn't even know. But all was not lost, as he was quick to defend his wife when John accused her of hiding his stolen money. Trevor was unassuming and to those around him, somewhat inconsequential. Ultimately, he was bit of a loser, but the audience warmed to Richard's unknowing yet well-meaning character and felt sympathy for him. The fact that he had the last laugh in the play's closing said it all.

John Miles

As demonstrated from his first entrance, John was a somewhat harassed character who was quick to anger. Martin Williams carefully mapped out the emotional journey from his initial entrance, gradually getting more worked up as the scene progressed with a nice crescendo in agitation until his first exit. He played the comedy well, using pauses to effect such as, *'I hadn't thought of that... I still wouldn't tell her'* (re torturing Barbara to get the number to the safe) and made the most of the browbeaten husband, weary from his wife's various complaints, namely about Trevor and his tight purse strings. Martin's John was shrewd; a contrast to the naivety of certain other characters, as he susses out Spriggs within a matter of minutes. In Act 1, Scene 2 his anger reached higher levels on, *'Those things are mine and I want them back.'* He used pace to his advantage on, *'Talk! What talk? Where?'* to emphasise his agitation as Spriggs provoked him with reference to the money in his safe. John's physicality throughout clearly demonstrated his levels of tension, including whilst manhandling Spriggs in horror following the revelation that Spriggs knew about the affair with Jenny, and later when shaking Jenny in his desperation to find his stolen money. John's emotional journey took a turn when he was stunned by Barbara's revelation that she had concealed her true age for so many years, and when he confronted Barbara in the final scene, the character started to unravel. Here, he certainly was not ingratiating himself with Barbara, or indeed the audience as his downward spiral now revealed the ugly truth in how he regarded his old friend, Trevor. Martin played the nastiness and unpleasantness convincingly, pitching John's level of threat and menace just right to sit into the lighter tone of this play.

Jenny Farrington

Sally Matthews played this smart, knowing and capable character. She made it clear during her opening scene with Trevor that she was well versed in handling his quips and foibles. As a devoted wife who championed Trevor, she contrasted Barbara well. Jenny's intelligence was presented with an easy presence on stage and crystal-clear articulation, and although her outburst in the final scene (*'I'm tired of making economies'*) shocked Trevor, this came as no surprise to the audience, who by this stage were in admiration of this capable and independent woman. Sally listened with intent and used lively facial expressions to convey the character's opinions of others. For example, in being wholly unimpressed by Spriggs' ridiculous excuses and (for the most part) refusing to be duped by his manipulative attempts, using humorous deflections such as, *'you're very articulate for a burglar'* and, *'you seem very unfortunate in your choice of relatives'*. Jenny was certainly more fearless than her husband, with a confident handling of the pistol when it was her turn to guard Spriggs, and remaining steadfast and indignant when John was accusing her of taking the money in the final scene. In particular, the relationship between Jenny and Spriggs evolved nicely. The book story was coloured using dynamic intonation to craft an enjoyable and entertaining scene.

Barbara Miles

Samantha Elgar entered as the seemingly intoxicated Barbara with the occasional stumble of the foot, but beyond her first appearance this drunken act was swiftly dropped. This was a character who was strategic, confidently in control and thoroughly unimpressed by those around her at all times. Her dry wit, sarcasm and brutal honesty pervaded as she made it clear to the audience that her patience for John's emotional antics had long expired, as demonstrated by her defiant drinking from the bottle in John's face during their first scene together, and later pushing past him to collapse onto the sofa. She was the first to find a seat in any scene, often distancing herself from the chaotic exchanges between the other characters, for example during the high moment of drama when Spriggs had been 'shot', Barbara was seen drinking by the fireplace and then relaxed on the sofa with her eyes closed, resting her head on one hand. None of the continually unfolding (and oftentimes ridiculous) schemes bothered her as she knew that she would prevail, regardless. She made no effort to disguise her disdain for her houseguests, frequently complaining about Trevor and his unwillingness to part with his money, and making her frustrations over John's fondness for Jenny

so clear that the audience wondered if she knew about their affair all along. Barbara served her own interests first, as shown in her dismissive retort when talking about the state of the house; *'it's not as disturbed as I am'*. She refused to please or placate others, for example refusing to vouch for Trevor's character in the first scene, and later crassly sharing with Trevor in Act II how John regarded him as a bit of a loser. The one moment in which Barbara lost her cool demeanour, when John revealed that he knew her true age, was well delivered with the character momentarily being rattled before unapologetically regaining the upper hand. Samantha's Barbara aptly portrayed an over-privileged, weary trophy wife who successfully plotted to take her power back. John foolishly underestimated his wife (*'you break into my house' - 'our house'*) and the value of her support. Chappell empowered Barbara to defend her accomplishments and made poignant social commentaries on women who enable their husbands to achieve success in their careers. As Spriggs unveiled Barbara as the culprit, Samantha's facial responses to John's misguided rebuttals were humorous. She then went on to revel in her confession, enjoying having the upper hand over her husband and leaving triumphantly; the victor unquestionably declared.

Spriggs

Andrew Middleton made the most of the comedy as he appeared from the window compartment, un-surreptitiously removing his gloves and overplaying the crick in his neck. He deftly fell into the cod policeman ruse, perusing the scene with hands clasped behind his back. The style of comedy was well observed in the obvious delivery of, *'Policeman?... Right!'* and the sob story at the top of Act II, Scene 2 about being a *'sick man'* was pitched with just the right amount of self-pity. Later in the final scene having been *'shot'* the over-dramatised, *'I'm dying'* and weak request for a cigarette were both suitably hammed up. Spriggs often built on a story to land a punchline, such as the Greasy/cat flap moment. Andrew shaped and executed this story well, and the audience really enjoyed this anecdote. The joke about 20 years of marriage being longer than a jail sentence for murder also landed well. Spriggs was a master of manipulation, using intonation to create intrigue on, *'How would you like to gamble?'* as he goaded Trevor to opening the safe. Although initial attempts couldn't penetrate Jenny's wall of suspicion, a change of tack with *'I was that little boy with the glasses'* finally wins her over. Moving on to Barbara, he complimented her *'exquisite taste'* before swiftly using his knowledge of her age and the stolen brooch to win her over. Spriggs had fun stirring the pot with Trevor and John around cheating during their tennis matches, with the obvious subtext being that John had cheated in more than just tennis. The social commentary on wealth and making money by extortion was well delivered, and the merchant banker punchline received a hearty laugh. Andrew made the most of Spriggs' delight in hiding behind the curtain and feigning an angina attack in the final scene. This humorous and entertaining portrayal was brought to a conclusion with the character's final social commentary on how the country was to blame for his actions.

Thank you to the society and to Mark Lambert for their warm welcome. It was wonderful to hear about recent improvements made to the walls and flooring of your lovely Studio Theatre, and about future plans to develop the auditorium. Local audiences are lucky to have the talents of this society on their doorstep, which can only be realised by the wider Production Team supporting the company on stage; congratulations to all involved in staging this APS production of 'Theft'.

Tash Moore
12th June 2024