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Society : Chesham Theatre Company
Production : Cheshire Cats
Date : 1st July 2016
Venue : The Little Theatre Chesham
Report by : Rob Bertwistle, Regional Rep. District 12

Show Report

I was very pleased to attend Chesham Theatre Company's latest production - standing in for your regular NODA Representative - Judith Watsham as she is closely associated with the company and indeed was a member of the production team.

This was a thoughtful, moving and often hilarious production of Cheshire Cats by Gail Young.

The production was well cast and each actor brought their characters to life without turning the rather stereo-typical characters into caricatures. The set was simple yet effective and I liked the symbolic and striking cat's eye motifs at the back of the stage. A collection of chairs were a park bench one moment and the interior of a railway carriage the next - to name but two of their clever adaptations. The lighting by Steve Cherry and the sound by Charlie Carrington and Peter Threadgold worked very well and certainly enhanced the production. CTC always have very effective and realistic sound effects. I particularly liked the very authentic station announcements – but more of them later.

This comedy drama, as it was billed, was a powerful piece and was based on the playwrights own experiences concerning the devastating news of a diagnosis of breast cancer.

Chesham Theatre Company certainly did justice to the message and sentiments of the subject with some memorable performances from the talented and committed cast. More specifically each of the main characters was beautifully crafted and brought vividly to life by the principal players. The minor, though by no means less crucial, roles were played by other members of the company.

In the principal line up Mary Murray was perfectly cast as the bossy and organising Hilary whose job was to plan, on an almost military scale, the events of the fund raising weekend trip to London. This was a strong characterisation – however Hilary's gentler and more sensitive side was revealed beautifully as she recounted her own inner thoughts and feelings in a very touching scene with Siobhan. Mary used the stage well and treated the enthusiastic audience to some wonderfully withering facial expressions. I liked the well maintained Northern accent too.

Susan Toyn gave a strong but gently comedic performance as Hilary's compliant and rather put upon stooge Siobhan. There was a lovely warmth and depth to this performance as she battled with blisters and craved chocolate and as the programme notes tell us the subject matter is close to Susan's heart. She used the stage well and her diction was very good. I felt the characterisation was not quite there initially which may have been due to a touch of nerves but she soon settled into the part and really looked like she was having a great time.

Katy Devine was very convincing as the complaining and constantly moaning Yvonne. She was certainly not happy that a rather unorthodox late-comer had joined the group of ladies and threatened to ruin her 'girlie weekend'. She was very funny in her protestations about this interloper and managed to give depth and interest to a character that could have become quite irksome. The horror that the newcomer was a man(!) was played very entertainingly. Katy had good stage presence and inter-acted well with fellow cast members.

Lisa Harbron was very good as the fanatically fit Vicky and certainly looked the part. The opening sequence with her going through a limbering up routine for the benefit of the rather bemused Maggie was very funny. She gave a very believable performance and interacted well with other cast members. Her diction was very good and she had excellent stage presence. I liked her vampish moves with 'love interest' Andrew which were very amusing.

Ian Slack the afore-mentioned Andrew was obviously enjoying himself immensely in this rather unusual part – half of which was played in drag! He was very funny and had great comic timing with some wonderful facial expressions. He really played up to the cat-like advances from Vicky. Ian displayed very good stage presence and clear diction was maintained throughout.

Liz Glover played the slightly awkward and shy Maggie beautifully. This was a well-observed performance with some excellent comic timing and hilarious facial expressions. In the course of the play each of the principal ladies stepped out from the action to deliver a monologue (in verse) revealing a little more of their characters and inner-most thoughts. However, in the closing moments of the play it was Maggie's monologue in which she revealed that, after receiving the results of tests, that in doing next year's walk her new found friends would be doing for her. This was a most moving and heart-felt moment - stunning the audience into silence. Liz handled this sobering and heart-breaking moment with great skill and sensitivity. So well done to you and indeed all the principals.

I did mention Mary's well-maintained accent earlier but on reflection I should perhaps say that all the accents sounded very authentic (and being a Northerner myself I consider myself to be a pretty good judge) so well done to everyone.

Other characters were played with conviction by Robin Scarborough as a slightly camp aerobics instructor, Dee Riley as a convincingly tipsy man about town and Nick Lansdowne as the station announcer mentioned earlier. Though quite a small part, the announcements were hilariously delivered as Nick mumbled the important parts and articulated perfectly that someone on the staff owed him some money! Was this in the script I wonder? If not top marks to whoever thought of putting it in – it was so funny!

Jane Dodd was good as an officious policewoman and other characters were played effectively by Eleanor Phillips as Madge and Emily Culverhouse as Ethel. Race marshals were played with tinker dry humour by Maggie Aldersley, Samantha Imbimbo, Diana Robinson, Paul Eckersall and Nick Landowne. Roger Miller was the photographer documenting the proceedings.

Having received a very warm welcome on my arrival from Director Helen Salisbury and assistant director Peter Threadgold it was good to catch up again with Helen during the interval where we had a chance to briefly chat about the play. Helen (and Peter) had coaxed some wonderfully comic and often moving performances from her cast. The pace was consistently brisk and good use was made of the playing area. This was a production which I'm sure she could be suitably proud of.

Costumes with Gwenda Hudson in charge were all appropriate for the setting and style of the production and the makeup by Pauline Richards and Sarah Walker was applied well and was in keeping with the production style.

Judith Watsham had provided a wealth of props for this production which the cast all used to good effect.

Andy Murray's programme design was very good. There was a wealth of information about the production as well as some informative and absorbing contributions from cast members.

Thank you all for a most memorable and entertaining evening and I would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone associated with Chesham Theatre Company the very best of luck with their next production

Kind regards,

Rob

Rob Bertwistle

NODA Representative

District 12

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