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Society : Chesham Theatre Company  
Production : The Unexpected Guest  
Date : 11<sup>th</sup> November 2016  
Venue : Elgiva Theatre, Chesham  
Report by : Rob Bertwistle, NODA Rep. District 12

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## Show Report

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to review Chesham Theatre Company's latest production the classic Agatha Christie thriller *The Unexpected Guest*. It is always a pleasure to visit CTC and this time the venue for their production was the versatile Elgiva Theatre where I have now seen a number of very varied and interesting productions.

Very many thanks to your very attentive Front of House staff and to Chairman Peter Threadgold for the warm welcome. Thanks also to Judith Watsham your usual NODA Representative for the equally warm welcome. As Judith was not too closely linked with this particular production we were able to watch the performance together although of course Judith could not write the report.

NODA Representatives are constantly striving to achieve consistency in report writing and so this was the perfect opportunity for us to 'compare notes'!!

### The Production

This Agatha Christie murder mystery written in 1958 certainly does appear to show its age in our modern digital *everything*, politically correct times and some of the situations and dialogue may seem faintly amusing and even absurd in today's world. A woman who claims to have shot her husband sits and converses quite calmly with a complete stranger who has just broken into her house while the body of her murdered husband reposes a few feet away in a wheel-chair.

However, the appreciative audience gave the actors their full attention as the not uncomplicated plot unfolded and full marks to director Paul Eckersall for keeping the action firmly and convincingly in the era in which it was set – the late nineteen fifties. Paul had created some interesting and memorable moments in the production but I felt that on occasions the pace did drop somewhat and this could have been avoided by picking up on cues more quickly. However, there were some good characterisations and the audience was kept guessing until the final moments. The characters generally interacted well and the production gelled but I felt there was often far too much unnecessary movement on stage. Characters were, it seemed, constantly standing up, sitting down again, or moving to another part of the stage and back again for no apparent reason. This I found quite distracting after a time.

The production looked fabulous with an eye-catching and authentic looking set constructed by Roger Miller and Peter Threadgold perfectly capturing the style and flavour of the fifties. There was some wonderful attention to detail - with the fireplace being a particularly outstanding feature. The set was decorated with period looking furniture and the working room lights were most effective. Steve Cherry's lighting design was atmospheric and very convincing. I loved the fog effect with the accompanying eerie lighting at the beginning and close of the action. If the set was totally 'home grown' - that is, nothing was hired, and some digital photographs of it were taken with actors present

and also with no actors I think it would be possible to put it forward for a NODA Scenic Award in 2017.

Adding to the realism were some genuine looking props - which the cast all used effectively - assembled by Jane Dodds with contributions by Judith Watsham.

The opening was very atmospheric but no sooner had car headlights (very cleverly done I must say) swept the darkened stage through the French doors at the rear of the stage than the driver of the said car appeared a couple of seconds later which did not quite ring true. Also the car was supposed to have crashed into a ditch which would have delayed the arrival of the mysterious stranger even more. I'm nit-picking of course but if things are to appear realistic little things like that need to be taken into account. Perhaps the headlights might have been dropped from the lighting plot.

The scene following (the next morning) was very well lit with the room appearing to be bathed in natural daylight. An effective garden backdrop by Jenny Wilment looked very realistic as seen through the French doors.

In the closing scene the passage of time and onset of dusk was beautifully captured in the lighting plot as the sunset gradually and almost imperceptibly faded to darkness.

Charlie Carrington's sound plot generally worked well but the sound of the fog horn was rather too loud which made it appear to be in the room rather than in the distance. Not being an expert on the sounds made by fog horns - my only other observation was that the two tone notes sounded rather unusual.

Other sound effects - for example the approaching cars and the telephone bell - worked well. I'm never totally convinced that recorded gunshots are convincing although on this occasion they seemed authentic.

The costumes, co-ordinated by Mary Murray looked mostly in period but I felt the character of Starkwedder looked a little too informally dressed for the period. A period suit and tie perhaps might have been more appropriate. Other costumes looked very good and fitted well. Shoes were also polished and period looking.

Make-up by Pauline Richards and Sarah Walker was very good and had been applied well. Everyone looked very much in period. Wigs and hair design was also very much in keeping with the style and period of the production.

Andy Murray's programme design was very clever. I liked the idea that the cast and director had their biographies written on a playing card reflecting the ones associated with the famous detective game 'Cluedo'. It is also a great pleasure to see CTC's proud references to their well-deserved NODA Awards and nominations. I also like the fact that the programme advertises fellow groups' forthcoming productions. It seems a great team spirit exists in this area of the region which can only benefit everyone!

### The Cast

James McCann was suitably corpse-like as the aforementioned murdered husband. It is a pity that the wonderfully effective shot gun wound make-up could not have been more prominently on display.

Lisa Harbron was effective as the grieving widow but the character appeared rather static in terms of posture and movement. Lisa projected well but I felt that the character would have displayed more emotion under the circumstances.

Alex Micallef seemed a little ill at ease as the 'unexpected guest' of the title. It may have been the costume which did not seem quite right and having to smoke on stage but the character did not come across in a confident way. There was good projection and Alex interacted well with his fellow actors.

Miss Bennett the family house keeper and loyal employee of the deceased was played well by Diana Robinson. Diana projected well and her diction was clear. She certainly looked the part in a suitably period costume. She projected the characters controlling nature very well.

Nick Lansdowne played the role of Jan with relish. This was quite a difficult character to portray and the vulnerability and menace of the character was captured well. I did feel that the menacing nature of the character could have been even more accentuated by the use of more measured tones and less movement around the stage.

Eleanor Phillips captured the victim's rather callous mother to good effect. She used her walking stick convincingly and projection and diction was first rate. Eleanor used the stage well and interacted with fellow players to good effect.

Louis Segal played the creepy manservant/valet effectively although I felt the character could have been more menacing - for example in his blackmail threats to Laura and Julian. Louis projected well and diction was good.

Catherine Britt was effective as Sergeant Cadwaller - always in character dutifully taking notes for Inspector Thomas played by Jonathan Coburn.

Jonathan captured this character well although there was a tendency to speak some lines upstage and in a lowered voice meaning that on occasions some of the dialogue unfortunately was lost.

John Mills played Julian – Laura's suitably haughty and aloof lover to good effect. The character had just the right amount of bravado and callousness. There was good projection and diction was clear. However this character looked ill at ease smoking on stage. Did there have to be quite so much smoking in the production? I know some smoking was called for but once it has been established that a character smokes or the plot hinges on a character smoking is that not enough?

Generally the cast were projecting well and most of the dialogue was audible but as I have remarked in many reviews that it is vital that the director ensures that the dialogue can be heard from all areas of the auditorium. The cast have been rehearsing the lines for many weeks and know them well – the audience only get one chance to hear them.

Thank you to all concerned with the production and may I wish CTC great success with future productions.

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