

Region

Society : Chesham Theatre Company
Production : 84 Charing Cross Road
Date : 17th March 2012
Venue : Little Theatre by the Park, Chesham
Report by : Rita Carpenter

Report

FRONT OF HOUSE AND PROGRAMME

I received a very warm welcome on arrival and was offered the best seat which was much appreciated. **Alan Crumpton** and **Will Templeton** were responsible for the poster and programme design. The front cover was excellent, beautifully designed, well set out and printed on good quality glossy paper. There was a half page given up to NODA inside the front cover. The photographs and details of the cast was much appreciated and a great help when reviewing.

THE SET

This was designed by **Alan Crumpton** who also painted the set aided by **Roger Miller** who helped with the construction. it was superb. creating the impression of theatre in the round. An extremely clever set using the centre of the hall with a double row of seats on either side. At one end was a view of New York with the skyscrapers strikingly depicted. A desk with a typewriter, a couch and bookcases which divided the two sets completed the American side of the action.. At the London end the bookshop was innovatively arranged. On the stage were huge books below which were several desks arranged to give the impression of a busy bookshop.. The leading man had his desk to one side but as the audience were on the same level when he was sitting down it was impossible to see him. I feel his desk should have been moved slightly more to the centre. Two other desks and a coat and hat stand completed the bookshop. **Judith Watsham** should be credited with the props especially the push along bookcase which brought books in and out of the shop. I particularly liked the way that some props (especially books and parcels) were in both sets at the same time echoing the action and giving the impression of continuity in the story. This was constructed 'in house' making it even more impressive..

LIGHTING AND SOUND

Lighting designed by **Steve Cherry** and operated by **Charlie Carrington** was excellent. The way it alternated between the two places as the action took place was impressive especially as some of the action was fast. The sound was superb. Sound was used effectively to signify important events in the play, Christmas music, the song New York New York, the peal of bells for the Coronation the sirens in New York, and fireworks for New Year together with the Paul Robeson song when Helen was in trouble was particularly poignant all of which set the mood perfectly even before the dialogue began.

COSTUMES

Rachel Strand was on costumes together with members of the cast and the era which spans from 1949-1971 was perfectly represented. Together with suitable hairstyles the makeup by **Pauline Richards** was spot on.

PRODUCTION TEAM

This was vast and took up almost a page of the programme. Director **Mike Conden**, Producer **Judith Watsham**, stage Manager **Stella Pearson** Stage Crew under the guidance of **Ed Crossley**. The others are too numerous to mention but suffice to say they all worked together to make this an outstanding production.

THE CAST

Suri Poulos as Helene Hanff was brilliant. Being an American she had no difficulty with her accent but her vivacity and sheer exuberance made her a character everyone adored. She was not playing a part she was living it. She included the audience in her every action talking to them and making them feel they were in her apartment with her. She was outstanding, sharing her life in correspondence. Comfortable in her role, her performance could not have been bettered.

Richard Worland played Frank with style and dignity. His beautiful speaking voice and elegant manner were impressive. Although coming across as slightly stuffy he was able to display an amusing side. First commencing his correspondence by signing himself with

just initials and his surname, he progressed to 'Frank' and after Helen addressed him as 'Frankie' at one point he mischievously signed his name as such. As the play progresses he was able to establish his ageing with almost no effort. A consummate actor he gave his all to the role.

Ewa Jackson was delightful as Cecily Farr. Although Frank gave the impression Helene was his particular correspondent, she was able to slip in a note in one of the packages and became a friend. Ewa played her role perfectly making her very pleasant character believable and leaving a sense of loss behind her when she leaves for another country.

Judy Consden brought a lively character to the role of Megan. Although not a very large part she played it well. I remember her from A Respectable Wedding when she was a nagging wife, so different from this character but she carried both roles off extremely convincingly.

Jenny Crumpton played the elegant American visitor Maxine Stuart with ease. She demonstrated her versatility superbly. I saw her as the agitated mother in A Respectable Wedding and she gave a brilliant interpretation of an old barge woman in 'Wind in the Willows' she seems to excel in whatever role she plays making her a great asset to the group.

The other characters had very small roles. **Tony Savage** as Mr Martin, **Peter Larkin** as William Humphries, **Jenny Templeton** as Joan Todd and **Jordan Wiles** as Thomas. Several of them had no lines at all but with good use of mime and superb facial expressions their roles were accomplished and believable. They were all comfortable and relaxed in their roles and quietly went about their business well aware that they were an integral part of the story.

This was a very accomplished cast working together to make this an outstanding production.

IN CONCLUSION

This was not an easy play to stage as the story is told in correspondence alone but director **Mike Consden** is to be complimented on the way he directed the action. It was smooth, it had pace and there were no weak links. I particularly liked the miming of

opening and closing the non-existent door into the shop. Everyone managed this with ease and the hat and coat stand added authenticity.

This play is based on a true story which expresses the dialogue between Helene and Frank. Their letters start off quite formally but as the play progresses they become long distance friends. Their correspondence relates the story perfectly. Helene, by self-disclosure involves the audience as friends and confidants. She is not afraid to speak her mind and invites us into her life and home. She shares her difficulties, her work situation, her joy and love of literature and how it shapes her whole existence. She knows her own mind and is happy to reveal her opinions as to her likes and dislikes. Frank first comes across as old-fashioned, the typical uptight English gentleman so suited to his occupation, working in the antique book business. Slowly, through his correspondence with Helene she was able to make a small chink in his reserve and we are able to glimpse the side of him which is warm and playful. He views Helene as his own special client and does not want the others in the bookshop to encroach on their long distance but completely platonic relationship. Helene is always promising to visit but obstacles prevent her trip, often due to her generosity. She sends gifts for Christmas and Easter to be shared amongst the staff deprived because of rationing after the war. Over time they become like a family to her albeit from afar which she looks after and provides with treats demonstrating her generous spirit to people she has never met. The final scene is very moving, the bookshop having closed, and Frank dying before Helen eventually arrives made this a poignant ending... It was moving and I loved it.

One of the best plays I have had the good fortune to review this year and it clearly demonstrates why Chesham Theatre Company has such a good reputation, this production certainly lived up to the very high standard we have come to expect from the group. A thoroughly enjoyable experience and I very much look forward to being invited to future productions.