

Little Waltham Drama Group : WHODUNNIT by Gretta and Samantha Brannon
Visited on October 10, 1986

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Before I attempt to give you my impressions of the evening may I say that I am not ~~trying~~ trying to write a formal 'notice' of the show couched in more or less literary style, but rather to try and 'chat' to you about it almost as if I was meeting the cast after curtain fall - if indeed, you had had a curtain! One other thing, which will already have become apparent, I am well in line for a booby prize as the world's worst typist but even so, it is easier to read this than my holograph!

First of all, coming to the actual performance, I enjoyed very much ~~being~~ being greeted by Carter and treated as a guest....I think this could well have been developed further so that all the 'staff' of the The Grange were there to act as ushers, programme sellers etc....incidentally, one rather unhappy aspect of the hall was the lack of light on the stage before the show actually started....the ~~stage~~ stage area was dead and dingy looking.....just the odd lantern on would have made all the difference.....likewise, it would have been lovely to have had the live music going on before the actual 'off'.....'canned' and 'live' don't mix terribly well even in 1986 when we've become used to 'wallpaper' music more or less all the time. The programme itself was rather a disappointment.....a programme to me should be rather like a well presented menu in a cafe ---a promise of gorgeous things to follow and some indication of what they are likely to be. The programme of WHODUNNIT provided the bare~~st~~ minimum of information....a list of cast and actors' names and a similar list of technicians and a lot of empty paper! This, I felt, was a great pity - something about the play, the authors, the Group....the name of someone to contact if one wished to join.....even advertswould have helped.....better still in this particular instance, why not carry through the 'guest' idea and provide a 'programme of events' for the House Party ?? I felt a little sorry for the audience, in that I had the great advantage of having read the script and I knew roughly what to expect.....I think they could have done with a few guide lines which you could have provided through~~out~~ the programme notes.

Having said that, I must say that I was very impressed by the general idea of the show.....a series of well known tunes with, in many cases, new and clever lyrics which told a story with the basic minimum of linking dialogue....the best description I could think of was 'ballad opera' - in the same tradition as THE BEGGAR'S OPERA' and even our old friends 'G & S'. I think the linking dialogue was a little too short for clarity and I found the commentator (Called 'Sleuth' in the script and 'Professor' in the programme) unhelpful and rather tiresome.....the balance here seemed wrong.....the characters needed to say more and the commentator less- better still, be totally eliminated.....as it stands he was the easy way out for the authors, who were obviously more concerned with the lyrics and the musical aspect than the characterisation and working out of the plot in terms of action.....if you analyse it there was little essential action in the piece. Never mind, I admired the courage of the whole conception and the return to the old English tradition of the popular opera....tunes people know and words they don't! Congratulations to author/producers for carrying it through. I will try and comment on the various aspects of the show under headings starting with-----

Presentation - sets, costumes, make-up props etc The setting didn't really suggest a 'baronial hall' but the size of the cast being handled on that tiny acting area meant that one couldn't see it (setting I mean) most of the time so that this was not of great moment. I think more could have been made of it by continuing the decor further into the auditorium than you had already done

I liked the use of the forestage and the entrances through the auditorium and if the decor had taken in more of these areas it would have helped to link the audience to the show and be part of the House Party ! I have already mentioned the lack of lighting before the show, once it started it was adequate rather than exciting....we could see the actors and this is vitally important - but I don't think it did anything more than that- I was never quite certain whether it was day or night, for example, --- it didn't really matter but it might have been fun to have had some indication....even the chandelier didn't seem certain ! The costume was very interesting....the programme boldly stated that we were in the late '20s' but it would have been impossible to deduce this from the things people were wearing.....it seemed to me that everyone had been dressed for character and not for period....this is fair enough in such a theatrical show but don't ~~be~~ put a date if you= don't intend to stick to it even vaguely ! In terms of character the dressing was good and suitable in almost every instancea few more changes would have helped to distinguish between the times of day, but otherwise I thought things were well chosen, once I had abandoned the 1920's concept -- a period, which, sadly for me, I remember only too well ! Make-up varied a lot and I think could have been more consistent.....either naturalistic or theatrical....mixing the styles is always a bit worrying.....this I think was the main problem of the show.....it had not been firmly placed in terms of style....the ~~XXXXXX~~ 'canned' music was firmly in the 20's or ~~XXXXXX~~ 30's but ~~the~~ music of the actual songs covered a long period of time in style and I think a bit of sorting out in terms of consistency would have helped the show enormously in all its aspects. Props were well chosen - furniture didn't quite have the baronial touch but was not an important part of the show....all available space had to be left to the cast ! The chandelier was a nice touch....we could have done with more of these- into the hall itself if funds would allow.

The Production Not content with solving many problems in the writing the indefatigable authors also placed the pay upon the stage....I am not sure they were well advised to do this....outside opinion could probably have rubbed the rough edges off the story line and the text and would probably have ensured that the aforesaid story line was clearer than it in fact turned out to be.....I realise well enough that the story was really an excuse for the singing but even so I think it should have been better brought out and this would have meant a bit of 'writing up' as well as a certain cutting of some of the lyrics which were several times overlongwhat I am trying to say is that authors are not necessarily the best people to produce their own work as they are too closely attached to it and tend not to be ruthless enough! Nevertheless, having said that, they deserve our thanks for getting such a large cast on to the acting area at all. The lack of space prevented very much significant movement but the smaller items were pleasantly choreographed, well within the capabilities of the actors, and the whole went with a swing most of the time. Inevitably, on such a small space the large cast had little option but to stand around in a large lump when it was all on together and rarely did we get any sense of place.... it could have happened anywhere (and did !) but the songs followed one another with great pace and the balance between the music and the voice was pretty good.....every now and then the piano and/or the percussion got over-enthusiastic and the voice was lost but generally they managed very well and it was good to have live musicians in the 'pit'. The producers had a very good basic idea of involving the audience as guests and using the auditorium for some scenes....I feel sure that this was absolutely right and could very well have been built up more by clearing some of the seats away and leaving a space in the middle - cabaret style - very little seating capacity would have been lost and a lot more acting area obtained and, of course, more direct involvement from the audience. Never mind, it was definitely on the right lines and perhaps if you do something else of this kind in the future (which one very much hopes you will) the experimnt can be extended.

One thing that demonstrates the idea which I've been talking about is the somewhat devastating opening to the show when the entire cast was introduced in around 3 minutes flat leaving us all desperately wondering if we would ever sort out the characters.....it was terribly neat and tidy and ~~easy~~ easy to do as far as the actors were concerned, but far, far too much information was given.....some of which could have been included in the programme ! A little more time is required for an audience to digest the huge chunks of info. which were flung at them.....as before, I was lucky...I had read the script but if I hadn't, I would have given up trying half way through the butler's announcements ! Let me, however, congratulate the author/producers in getting it on at all !

Acting I must apologise before I begin that with such a large cast it is impossible to give individual comments on everyone....I must just talk about the acting generally and mention one or two outstanding contributions. The main problem about acting in this kind of show is to keep any consistency in style.....Gielgud once defined style in acting as "knowing what play you're in".....this is a deceptively simple phrase but it contains an enormous truth.....everyone should ideally be in the same play. This rarely happens in the amateur theatre, largely because of the huge variation in experience and the relatively short rehearsals which do not allow a producer to impose a consistent style on the cast as a whole. This was evident in the acting/singing in WHODUNNIT....some singer/actors obviously had considerable experience in both fields, others were actors trying to sing and yet others were singers having a go at acting.....some knew how to 'put a song' across - some seemed to need a 'mike', which they had not got ! This was inevitable given the conditions and the size of the cast etc..... bearing all this in mind it was amazing how well the show held together in spite of huge variations. Perhaps the strongest section of the company for me was the quartet of servants (2 Carters, +Dolly and Potter) who seemed to me to make a lot of sense at all times; Fiona, Felicity collaborated in a good duet followed immediately by the "show-stopper" from Olga Petrov, which for me was the high spot of the 'numbers'.... excellent lyric, extremely well delivered with lots of stage sense. Hiram and Lola showed to advantage in their solos and there was a nice duet from Lord and Lady Randall and an equally effective HUSH HUSH quartet including Lord Randall again with David, Archie and Rodney. In many of the other numbers it was impossible to distinguish the lines and words of the songs....sometimes because the musical balance was against the singer but often because ~~enunciation~~ enunciation was not good enough and the voice was lacking in projection. These things may sound harsh but they have to be said and to overcome them is not too difficult once the actor/singer really faces the fact that this process is hard work and needs application and endless practice. Summing up, the acting was a very mixed bag but much talent and promise was displayed, projection and diction being the stumbling blocks in some cases.

This was essentially a company show and it held the stage and was thoroughly enjoyable. I hope very much that the script will not be allowed to vanish into oblivion but will be cut, embellished, cleaned up and tried out again with some other group in the area.....a word of warning here - it may well be necessary to get the original ~~composers~~ composers and lyricists' permissions to parody their work....maybe you've already done this, but if not do please do so before passing the thing on to anyone else ! I do hope you will feel able to try another one of these 'ballad operas' and if you do I'd very much like to see it.

Jack A. M. Ashley
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