

NORTH EAST ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

FULL LENGTH FESTIVAL 2009/2010

ADJUDICATION

Group	Writtle C.A.R.D.S.
Venue	Village Hall, Writtle
Date of Adj.	Friday 17 November 2009
Production	THE FARNDALE AVENUE HOUSING ESTATE TOWNSWOMEN'S GUILD DRAMATIC SOCIETY'S PRODUCTION OF 'A CHRISTMAS CAROL' by David McGillivray and Walter Zerlin Jnr
Director	Shirley Piggott
Adjudicated by	Ian Amos

Introduction

The Village Hall is in a charming setting on the Green in Writtle and on a cold night it was good to find it bedecked with Christmas lights and cosy inside. There was a full and enthusiastic audience who added to proceedings; joining in and laughing heartily.

A play like THE FARNDALE AVENUE HOUSING ESTATE TOWNSWOMEN'S GUILD DRAMATIC SOCIETY'S PRODUCTION OF 'A CHRISTMAS CAROL' presents dilemmas for performers and adjudicators alike. We have amateur actors acting 'real' people acting (often deliberately bad) amateur actors. To pretend to act badly you need to be a competent actor in the first place. This also goes for the all of the production 'errors' – lights, sound and props etc. They have to be believable and superbly timed.

For an adjudicator – what things were intended to not-quite-work and what were perhaps unintentional shortcomings in the production? I hope I get most of them right!

SET

Around the stage were basic black curtains. I think ideally these should have been made neater and the stain centre back didn't help as we had to stare at the curtains all evening. That said the set items that had been made and were brought on were mostly bright, skilfully designed and fulfilled their role well. The whole-y door and bed were great fun, as was the stove. Great effort had been taken for the smallest joke; a cut-out of an aeroplane that 'flew across' the stage. I think a set of wings or the like also flew across – but sadly the moment was lost as action and lights seemed to be mistimed and we were in darkness when it happened. The staircase in Act 2 might have been better had it had a sloping top – the 'walking downstairs' joke would have worked even better then.

COSTUME

Generally the costumes were quite well realised – the actors’ ‘real’ characters being nicely dressed to type. A profusion of other costumes or add-on indicators of character were required for the players in ‘A Christmas Carol’. This is the area where more might have been done. A wig and whiskers for Scrooge could have helped ground his/her character even more – and also might have been rather funny. There was also some lack of logic on why some scenes had no attempt at Victoriana. My take might have been that an ‘amateur’ company would always have gone for over-the-top Victorian even if it involved the costumes clearly being made from old curtains or bits of dog blanket. But things like the clearly too modern snowman entered into this spirit.

LIGHTS

These gave a good general cover. There was the odd deliberate lighting comedy joke – but there were a few lighting cues that I suspected were not quite right. There was also a strange spinning disco effect from back which I couldn’t work out what it was being timed to. A little more atmosphere would have helped the ghostliness of the real tale to come through and have given lights something a little more exciting to work with.

SOUND

The radio interference interruptions of the taxi and emergency services were very funny, well timed and bang on level wise. I suspect they were performed live (though they might have been pre-recorded). The accompaniment to the songs was generally of a good level – though too loud in the first song.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

This was handled very efficiently with props and set all appearing and disappearing to time.

CAST

The main challenge to the actors other than the usuals...lines, comedy timing etc is that they have to play not only a character but then a character playing other characters. Some achieved the differentiation between these better than others.

The songs are generally fun and memorable in this show, but they *do* need to be sung with vim and gusto. Mostly they were well in tune – but I would have chosen rougher edges for a more exciting delivery.

LAURA BENNETT (Mrs Reece)

Laura brimmed with confidence in this role and was very much the comic and dramatic dynamo keeping the show driving along. From her overly-loud wanderings in the audience chatting to people she gave us a clearly defined portrayal of Mrs Reece; playing every part with enthusiasm, little talent and a total lack of stagecraft. Laura has a lovely clear delivery and a delightfully animated face.

SHARON GOODWIN (Thelma)

Sharon had the main ‘proper’ acting role as Scrooge. Scrooge needs to be *almost* a straight role as the basic story has to come through for the comedy to work. Sharon’s Scrooge was suitably gruff, blustering and aloof from the scenes around him. I did however feel that her Thelma was not a separate enough character. She needed to find a few more traits that clearly defined her. A little more projection would be good as well.

ELAINE REYNOLDS (Felicity)

Elaine showed herself as a reliable stalwart – playing mostly some of the less showy parts in the production. However she made up for this with her madcap ‘filler’ dance towards the end of the show - arms and legs flying everywhere – which was great fun.

JEREMY PRUCE (Gordon)

Jeremy has a comically sour face. He acted boredom and bewilderment and pain throughout the show. A little more volume and projection might have been nice – but he found fun and characterisation in each of the many parts he played, but always with dour Gordon delightfully lurking.

HAZEL REILLY (Mercedes)

Hazel’s role is a running joke: She is injured and everything in the play conspires to exacerbate that injury. There is lots of fun to be had in this role. Hazel remained sometimes a little *too* Hazel, smiling at situations when Mercedes would have shown pain or the like. But she made up for this with good comic timing.

PRODUCTION

There was lots of comic invention from the director – obviously some of this is scripted, the slapstick etc, but more had been added – and dare I say – there was room for *even* more. Also tighter physical and verbal jokes; once in a while the joke was lost because of acting and/or technical mistiming. Perhaps Dickens’ ‘real’ story could have been allowed to work a little more genuinely – spookiness, dinginess, smoke, moody lighting, appropriate music – which would have given a firmer base to spoof against. The play does tell the tale of Scrooge rather well.

But I thoroughly enjoyed the simple things; Mrs Reece squatting behind the stove chatting away as she takes the logs, the faces through the door and bed, the scene where the ends of lines had not come out on the photocopier and the rather bad charades that allowed us all to feel involved. But was the winner a stooge...my vote was on ‘yes’ – but I didn’t quite know – so mission accomplished if he was.

This production provided a really good warm-up to Christmas. Well done all!

Ian Amos 15/12/2009