

North Essex Theatre Guild

Full-Length Play Festival 2010 – 11

Adjudication

Group: Writtle CARDS

Vanue: Writtle Village Hall

Date of Adj: 30th October 2010

Production: The Haunting of Hill House

Director: Nick Caton

Adjudicated by: Jane Rayner

Introduction.

What a great idea to perform this play around Halloween!

There was a particularly spooky opening to the play, with a disembodied voice, setting the scene and getting us in the right mood for a ghost story.

Mrs Dudley's slow, measured movements as she removed dust covers from the furniture added to the gentle build up of menace. Without even knowing her character and without speaking a line, she managed to convey something subtly unpleasant.

The atmosphere built up very well, thanks to the tension expressed by the actors, especially Daniel Curley.

The hall decorations were imaginative and suitably creepy.

Front of House.

Warm and welcoming, despite our nearly late arrival. Despite Liz's knowledge of the Chelmsford area and my AA route planner, we got ever so slightly lost. I hope to visit Writtle again sometime in daylight – it looks really pretty.

Set.

A fairly typical country house setting, well furnished. The door at the side of the stage was obviously going to lead to somewhere interesting and the double doors that closed on their own were a nicely creepy touch.

I would have liked more books on the bookcase. We liked the bland colour scheme. Having to have a bedroom on one side of the stage did limit the main acting area but the cast coped well. There was a good attempt at perspective through the door. The scene clearing and resetting were done very slowly. Usually backstage crew nip on and off again as quickly as possible, trying to be unobtrusive. Had the drinks table been to one side, all the clearing away of glasses wouldn't have been centre stage.

Costumes.

These were mostly well chosen and suited the late 1960s. Not having read the book, I don't know whether Theodora is always a hippy, but this was a good ploy and set her apart from the other characters. Luke's dark role neck top and brushed forward hair suited the period well (very Avengers style) and Dr Montague's cardigans worked too. We felt that Eleanor's clothes were really too modern and ordinary and had nothing about them to suggest the 60s. Her nightdress was not flattering and having to hop in and out of bed in a short garment can't have been easy. Pyjamas would have been a better choice.

A minor irritation that could have been overcome, was when everyone is woken in the night and is in night wear except Mrs Montague. Surely she could have put a long dressing gown over her costume or else some reference could have been made about her not having been in bed. This was a missed opportunity for some humour. Surely her character would have favoured a long, floaty, over-beribboned robe.

Sound/ Lighting

The play stands or falls on its sound effects and these were very good. The knocking that grew uncomfortably loud, building suspense; the maniacal laughter – standard ghostly noises but just right for a play that doesn't have scary characters and relies on scaring us, using our imagination. We were engrossed....

The music used between scenes was well chosen.

The lighting was effective

The only disappointment was at the very end of the play as Eleanor's car drives away. I had chills down my spine as her voice echoed through the hall, showing by her words just how far she'd descended into madness. Excellent and chilling use of a voice off but then I didn't feel that the car noises seemed very real and the crash into the tree was an anticlimax. I wanted to be shocked at the intensity of the crash. That moment had been building and suddenly it was over with a whimper rather than a bang.

Eleanor. *Laura Bennett*

The character started as a very nervous young woman, who began to visibly relax as the other guests arrived. Laura conveyed real panic and anger as she slowly slipped into insanity. She showed a chilling strangeness that was more terrifying than full blown madness.

Theodora. *Hazel Reilly*

A confident portayal, with a slightly amused manner overlaid with some healthy cynicism. Sometimes her speech was a little too fast but this did seem to suit the character.

Dr Montague. *Daniel Curley*

Pompous and pedantic, he painted a scary picture with his words and built tension. This was a professional piece of intense acting, crucial to the success of the production. Great stage prescence. He really knew how to punch out his lines to give each of his scenes a dramatic and clear ending.

Luke. *Ben Fraser*

Always in character. Just an ordinary chap, with a pleasant and tolerant manner, showing no fear at first. Perhaps a little too relaxed between hauntings. Ben gave us a very likeably character.

Mrs Dudley. *Liz Curley*

What a wonderful performance. She was plain, severe, abrupt, obstructive and horribly unfriendly with all her lines delivered with a deadpan face but a wicked gleam in her eye. A doom laden presence that would terrify a ghost! She obviously relished the role and the audience loved her. Despite her awfulness, she was almost comical – and I mean that as a compliment! At one point she gave Dr Montague such a glare. A real “if looks could kill” moment! Her focus was 100 per cent.

Mrs Montague. *Hilary Jones*

A complete contrast to the others and especially her husband. She was bossy and organised but played the role with touches of humour.

Conclusion.

The programme told us to “Prepare for a scare” and that’s what the cast and crew gave us. It makes a pleasant change for a ghost story to be played straight. Much like the classic ghost movies of the 60s and 70s in which much of the horror is in everything not seen directly on the screen. Hill House feeds on the fear of the inhabitants. So many plays are written as comedy thrillers and I often find them neither funny or thrilling! The cast all interacted well, and there was a good rapport that developed between Eleanor and Theodora. Perhaps they would not have kept their backs to the door when under spooky attack, even if it meant kneeling in front of the sofa or on the floor.