

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

FULL LENGTH FESTIVAL 2008-9

ADJUDICATION

Group	<i>Writtle CARDS</i>
Venue	<i>Writtle Village Hall</i>
Date of Adj.	<i>3rd July 2009</i>
Production	<i>The Memory of Water</i>
Director	<i>Nick Caton</i>
Adjudicated by	<i>Sara Green</i>
Accompanied by	<i>Jenny Burke</i>

Introduction

Shelagh Stephenson's play, set in the North East of England, is described as a comedy and deals with the problems of memory – losing it, misremembering etc. It is play where light and shade are essential as so much of the dialogue is repetitive. We did begin to wonder whether the author was working through some of her own grievances. The production, when it worked, was charming, however there was not enough variety of pace and emotion to carry the play through with conviction. The actors were hard working and dedicated and they were supported by good technicians.

Front of House / Publicity

We were welcomed by the group and given good seats in the auditorium. The programme was informative, although we were confused by the naming of "Mark" instead of "Mike"..

Set Construction / Set Painting

The set was indicative of an elderly woman's bedroom – slightly old fashioned, with no concession to the concept of design. I was particularly pleased to see the main picture on the wall as I had it in my room when I was a little girl. The wardrobe door was well built as was the window – both opening and closing perfectly. Less successful was the stage right of the stage. with the cluttered furniture and rather inconsequential entrance/exit, so people seemed only to be disappearing into the corner of the room, rather than going out of it.

Stage Management

Efficient stage management. We liked the snow effect when Mike came through the window.

Lighting Design and Operation

Very effective lighting on opening of the play. We were immediately drawn into something strange and other worldly. Good general lighting with no “black spots”. However there was no obvious light source and it was a pity that the bedside light remained unused. And there was an irritating flickering during the first act.

Sound Design and Operation

We liked the choice of music to open the show and the sound levels were good.

Costumes

Generally speaking the costumes were appropriate and well chosen, although we would have expected to see more cold weather clothing as it was snowing outside (a dressing gown for Mary would have been a nice touch). If Catherine was trying on new clothes, perhaps they should have had labels. We particularly liked the mother’s wardrobe and were impressed by the duplication of the green dress.

Props

The set dressing and “carry on” props were all appropriate.

CAST

Shirley Piggott as Vi

A gentle and ethereal delivery. She created the ghost of the mother nicely. Her monologue was a little clipped in delivery and lacked a real sense of emotion and meaning. However she did try hard and there was something rather nice about her.

Sharon Goodwin as Mary

Sharon used a lot of expression in her dialogue, but she needed more range. We only saw the slightly wingeing nature and it would have been a more entertaining performance if we had been given more insight into the character. We also felt that she did not quite convince us that she was a doctor. After so many years of education she would have spoken with more authority. This was a challenging role, as Mary was on stage virtually the whole time. Sharon rose to the challenge well, creating good pace and energy to push play along.

Jean Speller as Teresa

Jean was also expressive and had more range, but she needs to watch her use of hand gestures, which were repetitive and got in the way of the performance.

She was particularly good at the drunken scene, which she played with realism and brought a good depth of emotion to this piece.

Hazel Reilly as Catherine

Hazel brought a real energy to her part – she was totally believable as the attention seeker. She spoke well with good diction and had excellent body language. She spoke her lines with conviction, with a real sense that she had inhabited the part.

Neil Smith as Mike

Neil had confidence and produced an interesting character yet he too failed to convince us that he was a doctor. He has a comfortable and relaxed manner in his delivery and an interesting voice.

Boot Banes as Frank

Boot had a strong delivery, good expression and good timing. However, he needs to watch his reactions when others were speaking. Sometimes he seemed to look as if he was merely waiting his turn. The blocking during his argument with Teresa did not help him.

Direction

This was a play where not much happened except the revelation of relationships between the players. The scene that closed the first half, when the sisters dressed up in their mother's clothes, brought the whole play to life and was delightful. Elsewhere the play was difficult to deal with as it was all played at the same level. There was no let up to the bickering and no let up to the way it was pitched. Some gentle moments could have been found, when a bicker was treated less threatening, some change of pace – speaking over one another when the dialogue was incidental and not important. – Finding a better rhythm would have helped us to listen to the somewhat over indulgent diatribe. We really could not understand why the dialogue with the mother was always so overly bitter - we kept thinking that it could have been less harsh and more about missed opportunities or disappointments.

We felt that some of the script should have been omitted or amended. The references to Yorkshire sites continually jarred with the accents of the actors. And the joke about Mike being 5'11" was not funny as he looked about that height from the audience. These idiosyncrasies kill the atmosphere as the audience is immediately given something to think about the production rather than the action. Given that they play had to be set near the seaside, Essex springs to mind as an obvious alternative; Southend perhaps replacing Whitby. On the subject of accents, the three sisters did not sound as if they came from the same family – a little dialogue coaching would have been helpful.

In the main the blocking worked well, however when Teresa was getting drunk and abusive and Frank was trying to stop her, he had to do so from the other side of the stage. Surely he would have gone over to her to try to remonstrate with her. It just did not ring true.

Generally speaking the actors worked hard and they all tried to convey their individual feelings in the piece. The key moment of the play – the hiding of the birth of Patrick from Catherine and his death from his mother, was handled with delicacy and sincerity.

Conclusion

This was an interesting production and although it did not always succeed in convincing us, there were some solid performances and delightful moments. Overall there was a real sense that all involved had committed themselves wholeheartedly into this production, which ultimately drew us into the lives of this complicated and disparate family.

Thank you

Sara Green
14th July 2009.