

# **NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD**

## **FULL-LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL 2009-10**

### **ADJUDICATION**

Group	<b>Writtle C.A.R.D.S</b>
Venue	<i>Writtle Village Hall</i>
Date of Adj.	<i>21<sup>st</sup> May 2010</i>
Production	<b>2 Noel Coward Plays</b>
Directors	<i>Laura Bennett and Hazel Reilly</i>
Adjudicated by	<i>Andrew Hodgson</i>
Accompanied by	<i>William Hooper</i>

### **Introduction**

In 1936, Noel Coward resurrected his now legendary partnership with Gertrude Lawrence by writing nine one act plays in which they could display their acting, singing and dancing talents. Originally presented over three nights under the title "Tonight at 8.30", some of the plays have proved more durable than others. Writtle C.A.R.D.S chose to present two of the most popular; "Still Life", a drama that is best known as the classic film "Brief Encounter" which was then contrasted with the comedic little gem "Fumed Oak" to provide a very entertaining evening.

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### **FRONT OF HOUSE/PUBLICITY**

This was our first visit to Writtle's intimate venue and we received a warm and friendly welcome. There was an excellent array of interval refreshments and a very informative and evocative programme. The film posters that were displayed around the hall were a nice period touch that put us in the right mood for these plays, both set in the 1930's.

### **STAGE DESIGN/PROPS**

The stage seemed to be very small but a front apron added some extra acting space. The set was cleverly designed to encompass the demands of both plays. In "Still Life" we saw a station refreshment room with classic 1930's green walls and green gingham tablecloths to compliment the colour scheme. Green "girders" had been added for this play to create the authentic atmosphere of a traditional railway station. The set was appropriately furnished and dressed, although the hat stand looked rather modern and appeared to have the same coat hanging on it throughout. The door and window were practical. The changing of the vases of flowers to denote each new scene was a lovely touch, as was the use of Mrs. Bagot and Beryl to conduct scene changes during the evening.

The set was very well adapted for the next play, "Fumed Oak". The basic layout was the same, but the green décor was replaced by floral wallpaper and the

“girders” removed. All the furniture used seemed to be in period and again the set was very well dressed, as befitted a suburban living room of the 1930’s. Properties in both plays were excellent, a lot were needed and everything seemed just right to us! Those Rock/Banbury cakes looked delicious! Well done!

## **Lighting and Sound Design and Operation**

The lighting for both plays was fairly basic but all the acting area was covered and times of day were well-conveyed. It was a shame that there was no apparent lighting outside the door to the station platform, where black tabs hung, but we do realise that space seemed to be very limited in that area.

Sound effects, particularly in “Still Life”, were good and the trains arrived and left on cue. I would have liked the all-important “Express” train in the final scene to have passed through with more volume and impact, reflecting Laura’s emotions at that point in the play. The inevitable Rachmaninov theme, that is so indelibly linked with the film version, could also have been louder and cued in as soon as the lights started to fade on each scene, in order to smoothly progress to the next.

We weren’t quite sure why Debussy music was used as the introduction to “Fumed Oak” as it seemed rather too sombre for what was, after all, a comedy, but the joyous finale music was just right. The “live” baby crying was a hoot!

## **Costumes**

As with the set and props, there was a good sense of period detail in the costuming of both plays.

In “Still Life”, Laura and Dolly’s frocks, hats and coats were all exactly right for women of their class and status. Alec was smart in his suit, although his hat seemed a little too large for him. Beryl and Myrtle were neatly attired in black and white, as was Albert in his cap and jacket. Stanley’s pullover was a nice period touch but we wondered whether he wouldn’t have also been in uniform or an overall?

In “Fumed Oak”, the clothing also reflected the lower middle-class status of the family. Doris’ headscarf and pinny, Henry in his black tie and wing collar, Mrs. Rockett’s calf length floral frock and Elsie’s uniform were all spot on. The ladies coats and hats were also good.

There was also good attention to detail in the hairstyling and make-up of both plays although Mrs. Rockett, despite her wig, looked a little more glamorous than the role suggested.

## **THE ACTING**

### **STILL LIFE**

**Alec Harvey:** Nick’s personable Alec caught the sincerity and innate decency of his character well. He had obviously concentrated hard on producing a correctly, and clearly, enunciated accent but this was sometimes at the expense of more

light and shade in his vocal delivery. He also had a tendency to cross his legs which was incorrect in terms of 30's etiquette and also created a physical barrier between himself and Laura. However, this is a very difficult role to pull off (given the iconic status of the role and, to modern ears, dated dialogue) and Nick succeeded in eliciting our sympathy for a man who was trying to control his emotions and do the right thing.

**Laura Jesson:** Michele was very well cast as Laura. She looked and sounded the part exactly, with her English Rose looks and cut-glass accent. She could have walked out of a 1930's film, reminding me very strongly of Madeleine Carroll (The Thirty Nine Steps). Michele played very sincerely opposite Nick and their attraction to each other was believable. We felt that Michele needed to project her voice more as she was very quiet at times and more visible emotional pain was needed in the final scene, but this was a commendable performance.

**Myrtle Bagot:** Again, Sharon looked just right in this role. The upswept hair-do with bangs was a nice homage to Joyce Carey in the film version. Sharon ruled over her refreshment room with a "refained" rod of iron and she kept herself busy at all times, indeed Sharon has a lot of stage business to cope with, including scene changes, and she did so with ability. We would like to have seen more pace and earthiness in her characterisation but Sharon gave an enjoyable performance.

**Beryl Waters:** Michele made a nice contrast to Myrtle, gossiping and enjoying her flirtation with Stanley. She also went about her duties in the refreshment room with diligence and purpose. The glimpse of steel Michele showed in her evening scene with Alec and Laura was telling sign that she was learning a lot from her manageress!

**Stanley:** Daniel possessed strong vocal projection and a good accent. He created an amusingly played "cheeky chappie" who was thoroughly enjoying his courtship of Beryl.

**Albert Godby:** In his first performance of the evening, Boot had a larger-than-life presence that suited the role Albert. Here was a station master not to be messed with and a man of simple pleasures! There was good comic inter-play with Myrtle which contrasted well with the intense relationship of Alec and Laura.

**Dolly Messiter:** We gleaned from the programme that Hilary was making her acting debut in the role of Dolly. If this was the case then we found it hard to believe! With an excellent accent and delivery, Hilary presented her insensitive character with insight. She also looked just right. A little more bustle on her entrance would have been nice but otherwise well done!

## **FUMED OAK**

**Henry Gow:** Boot re-appeared to great effect as the down-trodden Henry. We really enjoyed this performance. Boot's facial reactions, whilst eating his

breakfast as his ghastly family squabbled around him, were a joy. In Scene 2, the worm turned with impact. Boot found the pathos as well as the humour in his character's situation and his long speech, in which he dreamed of foreign climes, brought a tear to the eye. Well done!

**Doris Gow:** In Elaine's Doris, you could still see the pretty young girl she had been when she had ensnared Henry, which is not always the case when this role is cast. Her buzz-saw like nagging of Henry, so many years later, made you want to strangle her, which is exactly as it should have been! There was a very good pace in Elaine's performance and she handled a lot of stage business with ability. Well done!

**Elsie Gow:** Having played a silent character in "Still Life", Clare made up for it in this play. If I say that Clare was absolutely ghastly as Elsie, that is the highest praise I can give her! Whether snivelling, murdering the recorder or gracelessly making her presence felt, she was hilarious. Despite a slight hesitancy with her lines at one point, this was a performance to enjoy.

**Mrs. Rockett:** From the moment she began to speak, one felt completely confident in Jean's hands. She knew exactly what her character was all about and created a comic monster. The feigned gentility and slightly glamorous appearance made for a different portrayal of Mrs. Rockett than I have seen before and it worked very well. Jean's timing was excellent and despite the fact that she was masked for a lot of Scene 2, this performance was a joy to watch!

## **PRODUCTION**

The directors had strived very hard to create the correct period ambience that these plays demanded. This was reflected in all elements of both productions, well done!

**STILL LIFE:** is a very difficult play to present to a modern audience not only because the repressed behaviour of the characters is so alien to the "Jeremy Kyle" generation but also because of the iconic status of David Lean's classic film version. The dialogue can also sound very stilted to contemporary ears, and top-notch acting is required to pull it off with complete success. This was a valiant attempt. There was a nice contrast in the behaviour and acting of the two main couples. We also admired the way in which a lot of stage business was handled to ensure that the refreshment room was a believable environment.

Generally, the pace of the production was rather too stately and there needed to be more light and shade in the action. Scenes should have ended with more impact, particularly the ending of the whole play which rather fizzled out. Blocking was also an issue. The positioning of the counter right in front of the main door meant that anyone standing at it (usually Albert) proved to be an obstacle that other characters had to surmount! The positioning of the table front centre also meant that whenever Laura and Alec were sitting at it, our view of the proceedings at the counter was obscured. If the table had been situated slightly off centre, stage left, this problem would have been alleviated and would also

have served to underline the gulf, emotionally and actually, between the two couples. However, there were lots of little details in this presentation to enjoy and an over-riding sincerity in the acting that touched the heart.

**FUMED OAK:** proved to be a very funny contrast to the first play. There was outstanding comic team-playing from the cast, ensuring that we were presented with four delightful characterisations and a good pace throughout. Humour and pathos were well-mixed and all the stage business was confidently handled. The only blocking issue occurred in Scene 2, when Henry was positioned stage left, directly in front of Mrs. Rockett. As this was during Henry's long speech, this meant that we could not enjoy her reactions to what he was saying. This problem could have been avoided if Henry had stood stage centre or Mrs. Rockett had sat in the centre armchair, rather than in the rocking chair which was set quite along way back.

**SUMMATION:** This was a very entertaining double-bill, presented with commitment by this small and friendly society. There was a good attention to detail in both plays which gave an appreciative audience a very enjoyable evening. Thank you!

Best wishes,

Andrew Hodgson (**Adjudicator**)