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Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Enchanted April
Date : 17th May 2024
Venue : Buscot House Theatre

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Enchanted April". Gary himself was on Front of House duties, shepherding the audience into the charming Buscot House Theatre, but he still found time, along with Director Carolyn Taylor, for a chat during the interval. It was a nice touch that members of the audience each found a copy of the programme on their seat in the auditorium.

"Enchanted April" is an interesting play in that above all it tries to evoke a mood – as might be experienced in one of those fleeting but unforgettable moments that can never be recaptured or recreated, no matter how hard we might try. Buscot House Theatre is a good venue in which to attempt to conjure up an elusive sense of perfect happiness; with our protagonists safely on the train to Italy, the audience is free to spend the interval wandering through the beautiful grounds of Buscot House, admiring the wisteria on a tranquil early summer's evening, before returning to the theatre to see how the lives of Lotty, Rose and their friends are transformed by their time staying at the castle of San Salvatore.

The company certainly worked very hard to try to ensure this production would live long in the memory. The narrative is driven by Lotty (played by Bex Hutchings), the wife of a dull family solicitor. Lotty dreams of escaping the mundane drabness of her life, and when she chances upon an advertisement offering a chance to rent an Italian castle for a month she determines to go. Bex was able to draw together the various facets of Lotty's character into a plausible whole: her drive and determination, her persuasiveness, and above all her indefatigable conviction that there is a happier life out there if we are only prepared to seek it out. Bex has considerable stage presence, and even as she opened the play, dressed for a damp English winter and with the sound of rain on the sound system competing with the rumble of the air conditioning, her vision of happiness was being sold so hard that we were already half-way to being won over.

Certainly Rose, an acquaintance from Lotty's church played by Amanda Linstead, stood no chance of standing in her way. Moral and self-effacing in roughly equal measure, Rose is appalled by her husband's transformation from romantic poet to purveyor of racy fiction and allows herself to be bullied into accompanying Rose to Italy if only to escape her unhappy domestic situation. Rose provides an excellent foil to Lotty's extrovert nature, and Amanda's great skill was to give away very little of her character at first, so that the audience's joy in witnessing this somewhat mirthless, introspective, and pessimistic lady evolve into a revitalised, carefree and optimistic woman was all the greater. Her deadpan repetition of "Al Italia!" was both humorous and revealing.

Of course, it would have cost a great deal to hire an Italian castle for a month, even in the early 1920s, so Lotty and Rose advertise for potential companions. They receive two replies. The first is from Lady Caroline, stylishly brought to life by Lu Waywell who perfectly captured the effortless sense of superiority, the languid and

sensual movement, and the questionable moral code of the more notorious members of her class and set. If we were concerned about the potential clash of values between Rose and Caroline, they paled into insignificance on the introduction of the second respondent, Mrs Graves (played by Debbie Lock). Although evidently connected to some of the great poets of Victorian England, the curtains had long since been drawn against the possibility of any sunshine entering Mrs Graves' life. Debbie used her walking stick to emphasise her character's curious combination of physical frailty and indomitable spirit, and while her measured speech and deliberate formality certainly suited an older character with fixed ideas, I did wonder whether or not a bit of brisk certainty now and again might have better suited such a powerful matriarchal figure.

It's going to be a girls' month away, so Lotty and Rose's husbands have to be informed. Lotty is married to Mellersh (played by Duncan Sinclair), a lawyer who clearly believes that his wife's needs and wishes are entirely subservient to his own. Having taken her for granted for so long, he has no practical response to the news that she's going away for an extended time, and Duncan persuasively portrayed a weak, self-centred man lacking in both imagination and empathy. His rather flat tone and unadventurous nature certainly made it entirely understandable that Lotty might want to get away for a while, but Duncan was also able to breathe a bit more life into the character when Mellersh joined Lotty at San Salvatore.

Rose is married to Frederick (played by Mike Fraser), a poet who fancies himself as a bit of a card now that he has metamorphosed into a successful author of romantic fiction. Rose is continually accusing Frederick of not taking anything seriously, and while there was initially little sense of affection or intimacy between Rose and Frederick, it would have been good to see Mike incorporate a touch more flippancy into his characterisation to live up to Rose's accusation that he thinks he's funny. I'm not sure whether a slight hesitancy in some early scenes, resulting in rather brittle conversations, was a result of nerves or a deliberate feature of Mike's portrayal of Frederick; but like Mellersh, the character gained in confidence once in Italy and there was enough sparkle about him for us to understand why Rose had been attracted to him in the first place.

The final male character is Wilding, the owner of San Salvatore, and played by Jonny Waywell. Jonny cleverly combined some seemingly incompatible character traits: the landlord possessed of a bohemian free spirit; a member of the cultured upper class but with an egalitarian attitude and the common touch. I'm not certain that even such an unconventional character would have sat on that delicate ornamental table, but no matter. Some of Wilding's character traits did get slightly lost towards the end of the play, but I think this had more to do with the writing as loose ends were tied up. So how did this eclectic mix of characters get on in Italy?

Well, the impact of the change on location was felt immediately, as the dark heavy curtains of 1920s England were replaced by the bright sunny vistas of coastal Italy, complete with trailing, climbing plants and a gorgeous colour palette. Mrs Graves and Lady Caroline were the first to arrive, and the castle is already starting to work its magic, with Caroline sporting a delicate cotton shift dress; even Mrs Graves' more formal attire is now a shade paler, although her selfish demands are as unreasonable as ever. The arrival of Lotty is the greatest catalyst for change: clad in a summery housecoat, she illuminates every scene with her delight in nature and overwhelming sense of positivity. The sighs of longing which characterised Act 1 are quickly replaced by happy exclamations of fulfilment as she breathes in the scents of spring. Who could resist her? Certainly not Rose, who allows herself to be taken out in the boat by Lotty and returns with a transformed attitude to life. Costume changes and styling were used very effectively to breathe new life into our four women, as the warm

Italian sunshine melts their frozen hearts, dissolves their differences and draws them ever closer together. A time of enchantment indeed.

At the castle the guests are looked after by Costanza, played by Sue Ashforth-Smith. Costanza's lines are in Italian, and I am assured that the words were clear and accurate; in any event, Sue's emotional and spirited use of gestures, and the reactions they provoked in Mrs Graves in particular, provided many of the play's most amusing moments. The idyll ends with a dinner to mark the arrival of Mellersh, Frederick and Wilding; Mellersh re-establishes a connection with his wife through his musical talents, with their fundamental closeness illustrated by the way in which they finish each other's sentences; Frederick returns to his poetic roots to Rose's evident pleasure; and Wilding finds a soul mate in Lady Caroline. And yet it doesn't feel clichéd as San Salvatore has worked its magic on the audience as well, and we can simply share in this happy moment.

Director Carolyn Taylor certainly brings the best out of her talented company. The cast knew their lines thoroughly, shaping their phrases to convey meaning, and making intelligent use of body language to give insights into character: Lady Caroline's languid arm movements and Mrs Graves' straight back were good examples of this. Cues were well timed and conversations sounded natural; the challenging scene in which Rose and Lotty inform their husbands of their plans in parallel conversations was realised well, although I personally would have preferred a touch more separation between the settings in the lighting design, and a hint of overlap between the lines so it felt more as if we were zoning in and out of two continuing conversations. The way in which the four women opened up to each other once in Italy was carefully considered and persuasively realised, with seemingly incompatible characters such as Caroline and Mrs Graves finding common cause. The blocking needed to be good on such a compact stage and it was, with the seating at the castle used to illuminate shifting relationships. Jan Crowdsom, Derek Crowdsom and Tony Edmonds' set was a visual delight, sympathetically lit by Sam Tate, and complemented by a range of atmospheric sound effects by Gary Bates. The noise of the steam train was particularly convincing and was picked up in the subtle movements of Lotty and Rose as they made their way to San Salvatore.

I have already commented on the way that costume changes complemented the evolving characters of the main protagonists, but more generally the costumes (by Joan Lee, Jeni Summerfield and Nell Tate) effectively established time and place; Lotty and Rose's ensembles in the first scene, the gentlemen's suits, Wilding's blazer and Costanza's uniform all carried an air of authenticity. Vixz Edmonds' properties included some appropriately dated furniture, notably the tables and chairs used in Act 1, and I was pleased to note that the glasses at least appeared to contain drinks ...

This was an ambitious production in that it tried to summon up a special feeling in its audience: a life-affirming or even life-changing moment of happiness. Such a moment feels different to each of us, but there was a sense of it in the air as the audience strolled back through the grounds to the car park. My congratulations to everyone concerned.

Andrew Walter

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