



Society : Cygnet Players
Production : A Murder is Announced
Date : Saturday May 12th, 2018
Venue : St Barnabas Church
Report by : Des Wilby – Regional Representative (District 3)

Show Report

Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it was to have visited Cygnet Players again and this time enjoy Agatha Christie's 'A Murder is Announced'. Following the successes of '9 to 5' and 'Top Hat', this was my first opportunity to see the society perform a drama – and a 'whodunnit' at that...

St. Barnabas Church provided a beautiful venue for this classic tale and the setting gave a wonderful 'feel' throughout the performance. With all its twists, turns and 'red herrings' this was an excellent choice of play and one that definitely kept the audience guessing and enthralled.

The cast photos, at the entrance to the church, were a nice touch and gave a taste for what to expect during the actual performance. The selection of background music used was highly appropriate to the time period and certainly helped the audience to 'get in the mood' on arrival. A similar choice of music was used during the interval and as the audience left.

Jeff Raggett brought his wealth of directing experience back to Cygnet Players and must be congratulated on the meticulous precision and attention to detail. The society is very fortunate to have such a wealth of talent and Jeff was able to carefully assemble an excellent cast for this production. Those onstage appeared extremely confident in themselves and well-drilled in their individual characters. Jeff was ably assisted by Gemma Miles and Adam Walker-Galbraith who, as Producers, ensured this proved to be an excellent piece of drama.

Carole Stewart simply excelled as Miss Marple whose outward appearance, including a skilful perchance for knitting, hid a razor sharp intellect and gift for solving mysteries. Quick to spot a clue and not wishing to 'step on' Inspector Craddock's toes, Carole gave a very solid, and credible, performance in this challenging role.

Gemma Ronte provided the central plot 'lynchpin' as Letitia Blacklock and gave an excellent characterisation of a middle-class country woman who suddenly found herself under threat. This was a confident performance and Gemma really made the part her own. Credible and strong this was an excellent piece of stage acting.

Alison Walters was a delight to watch perform as the lovable and confused Dora Bunner. The ability to inject moments of humour into a 'whodunnit' was not missed and certainly helped to endear 'Bunny' to the audience. This was a strong and well worked piece of character acting from someone who had really grasped the part with both hands.

Jamie Miller-Hughes also gave a very strong piece of character acting playing the archetypical middle-class young Julia Simmons. With a sophisticated accent, Jamie demonstrated her accomplished acting skills and delivered an excellent overall performance.

Sam Cunningham gave a very solid performance as Patrick Simmons. Both looking and sounding the part Sam delivered a very recognisable character from both the period and of a type frequently used by Christie. I particularly enjoyed the sibling relationship between Julia and Patrick which was obviously shattered when it was revealed they were in fact lovers...

Abbie Minnock was quite simply wonderful as Mitzi - the hysterical and melodramatic Hungarian housemaid. Indeed, I'd go so far as to say Abbie's performance was exceptionally well thought out and delivered. Possessing a volatile, and excitable, nature, Abbie gave a truthful representation of how foreigners were often viewed in the England at the time. Clearly enjoying herself, and maintaining an excellent accent throughout, this was a very strong performance and one to look back on with pride.

Phoebe Fleetham delivered a solid performance as Phillipa Haymes and gave us a recognisable character so prominent in literature of the time. Confident and a clearly accomplished actor this was a good part for her and she used it well.

Lizzie Kempson was quite excellent as the snobbish and nose-y Mrs Swettenham who'd been predictably drawn to visit Little Paddocks by the curious announcement of a murder. This was another clear example of a well thought-out character and strong acting skills.

Jake Wells did well in his stage debut as Edmund Swettenham and certainly looked the part of an upper class gentleman. Edmund's obvious attraction to Phillipa was always gently rebuffed but he never quite 'took the hint' and persisted in trying. I look forward to watching future shows where Jake can further develop his acting skills.

Ian Ward, as Inspector Craddock, avoided the trap so many fall into of being a bit slow on the uptake during his investigation. The role of detective is a key one, especially to counterpoint the amateur sleuth, and Ian delivered a strong and believable character well. Confident and in control, I enjoyed the quiet humour Ian brought to his character.

Joe Beecroft (Sergeant Mellors) and Ben Waterhouse (Rudi Schertz) both had small cameo parts but each quite key to the overall plot. Well done to both.

Good vocal projection is without doubt a key skill, especially in such a setting as St Barnabas Church, and every member of the cast managed to deliver their lines with clarity. Indeed, for the second act I moved to the back and was able to hear all dialogue clearly. Given the complexity of the plot, and significance of even the smallest utterance, this was an important part of the production and one to stress at every opportunity.

The set was cleverly designed and of a very high standard. Special recognition must be given to Gavin Murphy and Will Prescott for their obvious efforts here. I liked the idea of having the entry doors when opened reveal the lobby of the house and this again was all in period. As a result, all 'entrances and exits' were well planned and allowed the production flow with minimal delay.

Props were sourced/managed by Gemma Miles and Phoebe Fleetham. Again, these were of a very high standard and ideal for the time period and social class representing. The quality of all props used definitely added to the overall visual impression.

Lighting was managed by Sally Bourne and used well to mainly differentiate the scenes. The obvious challenge came when trying to stage the murder scene, ideally in a total 'blackout', but this was impossible as the church windows couldn't be completely covered. By simply dimming of lights and relying on strong acting skills, this was quickly and effortlessly achieved with no loss to the plot or realism. Sound was managed by Ben Waterhouse and everything ran smoothly throughout.

Costumes were managed by Phoebe Fleetham and Jan Huckle. I was impressed with the number of costumes used as these were all of an excellent standard, all 'in period' and certainly helped define the characters by class and social status.

There were also no credits for hair and make-up leading me to assume these were handled by the cast members themselves. Whilst the men had relatively little to do here, the women wore suitable make-up and had their hair in styles appropriate for both the period and social class held.

The programme was arranged by Will Prescott and Kim Schenkelaars. This was of a high standard with interesting information about the play, Director's note and cast biographies. It is always pleasing to see the NODA reference displayed and I feel a well-designed, and informative, programme adds to the audience's enjoyment.

Congratulations to all those involved with 'A Murder is Announced'. I am sure that the entire audience, like me, left feeling highly impressed with the quality of this production and Cygnet Players in general.

I look forward to returning in September and this time enjoying 'Merrily We Roll Along'.

Des Wilby
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