

BRANTHAM AMATEUR THEATRICAL SOCIETY

CAUGHT IN THE NET by Ray Cooney

OCT 28-30, 2021

Adjudication date: Fri Oct 29

INTRODUCTION:

The genius of farce, Ray Cooney, can make us believe that people could potentially dig themselves into trouble as deeply in real life as they do on stage.

In the cold light of day, of course, Caught In The Net raises quite a few questions...surely the first wife would have been bitterly hurt and betrayed? Surely the second (almost simultaneous) wife would have similar feelings?

Fury...jealousy...not to mention the legal problems. Ah, but farce is another country – they do things differently there!

Many farces have a very un-PC vibe about them today, and groups probably don't choose them quite as often as they once did. So BATS' energetic venture is almost a novelty these days, and the wisest option is to leave your scruples at the door, sit back, and give in to the laughter as the outrageous situation escalates.

Caught In The Net has all the vital ingredients – two overlapping homes, lots of doors, one frantic instigator of chaos whose job offers opportunities to live a double life (as he did in Run For Your Wife), not to forget an unwilling co-conspirator, a small number of totally innocent people who have no idea what's going on, and so on. The plot is so complex and fast-paced, that I can only congratulate the BATS cast and co-directors for tackling it.

In this sequel, John is horrified that his son and daughter (one in each home) have accidentally met online and seem on course to fall in love.

SETTING & PROPS:

Quite a challenge for the set design/building team...although the suggested two front doors had been reduced to one to save space. The other requisite doors leading to the kitchen/bedrooms and so on were all there. We soon got to grips with these overlapping homes, one in Wimbledon, one in Streatham, and both maintained, bigamously, by taxi driver John Smith. Luckily, perhaps, the central furniture is used by both homes.

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The two decors were clearly defined: shades of pink, rose and cream on one side and apple green and sage on the other.

Well done for visually splitting the front of the stage into two, with a red brick effect around the Streatham street sign, and grey brick for Wimbledon.

As for the props: the two different landline phones and a confusing quantity of mobiles looked right, and extra bits and pieces such as suitcases, snorkel, endless lunch boxes and mugs of coffee all played their part. Gavin's motorcycle helmet looked a big large, but I'm no expert.

The accidentally-missing mobile was hilariously covered up.

SOUND/LIGHTS:

The technical crew have to be on their toes with a fast-paced show like this.

The two doorbells rang on cue, and the mobile phone business went smoothly, (well from the tech team's point of view!) including John's distinctive ringing tone.

Outdoor sounds, like the car/taxi revving away were also smoothly executed.

The lighting somehow kept pace with the action. A tough job, smoothly done.

COSTUMES:

Modern dress, of course, but nothing too modern, so hard to pinpoint an exact year, but presumably this is anywhere onwards from 2000 when the comedy was unveiled as a follow-up to Run For Your Wife, featuring the same bigamist taxi driver, 18 years on.

Loud Hawaiian shirt for Stanley, a checked mini skirt for Vicki, denims for Gavin, smartish casual for John Smith himself and the essential dressing gowns/ dresses for the wives. I did feel that Mary was left in a rather dowdy housecoat (I think?) for too much of the time, though.

It might have been fun for the two teenagers to have been a bit more grungy, but as they seem to be written as well-spoken, sharp and educated, the directors probably felt no need to overdo the possibilities.

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PERFORMANCES:

JOHN SMITH: Mark Hinson has a gift for frantic comedy, and clearly enjoys it. There was corpsing, between him and Ben Cook's Stanley, but it was just about reined in at the right time and the way it was tackled owed much to experience.

The missing mobile phone failed to throw Mark, who carried on his conversation on "the invisible one" until rescued. This was genuinely funny and – to be honest – somewhat in line with the Cooney farce tradition. If done well, and controlled, this species of corpsing can be enjoyable for all of us.

Mark worked his socks off, and the only real criticism is that the directors had allowed his panic to reach fever-pitch too early on. Farce is even more successful if it builds up during the first scene, rather than starting off at full pelt.

But his many set pieces, from diving over the furniture, to disguising himself with the snorkel and pretending to give swimming lessons, were thoroughly enjoyed by the BATS audience.

MARY SMITH:

Teresa Fraser's increasing bafflement with the "missed calls" and "wrong numbers" caused much amusement from the start. The role was played with long-suffering empathy and humour, not to mention disgruntlement towards Stanley the lodger.

BARBARA SMITH:

Lesley Mercer's scenes of bewildered frustration were equally droll and, like Teresa, she kept up the pace with confidence. Her transformation from the towelling robe and shower cap to glamorous dress rightly caused a few gasps of appreciation.

GAVIN SMITH:

Lewis Howlett was reliable with his lines and clearly enjoyed the story as it unrolled before him. A little bit tentative at the start, as Lewis tended to look towards the characters he could not "see" in order to time his lines for the crossover conversation. Highly understandable in a very difficult scene, but this could have been made less obvious.

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He also had a tendency to laugh at the situations that Gavin found himself in. This is nowhere near as effective or funny (for us!) as keeping in character and looking surprised/baffled/offended etc. .

I know I've said that corpsing can work, but it takes experience to get away with it. Lewis is very young and a useful actor, so there is plenty of time to learn. Gavin's rollercoaster ride of confusion was nonetheless entertaining and pacey, and we look forward to seeing more of what he can do.

VICKI SMITH:

Connie Lewis made a neat and determined Vicki, with a sharp sense of her own worth. A girl who stood no nonsense and was probably more grown up than her dad. Connie is a personable and confident performer. It was good to see two genuine teenagers cast in their true age group!

STANLEY GARDNER: As the long-suffering lodger, Ben Cook was not only a mighty presence, but kept up a mighty pace as he hurtled ever deeper into the mess of John's double life. Ben gave us some wonderful tirades of helpless rage towards the barely-straight-faced John.

Really, Stanley is the one who works harder and faster than anyone, being dumped in the deep end early on, and becoming more and more ingenious with his lies and excuses - especially the invention of "Sharon" the supposedly ditsy office colleague on the phone. Having the sense to walk off stage and return with the missing mobile was just one of Ben's priceless moments.

STANLEY'S DAD:

A lovely little cameo of a rather lusty and definitely confused elderly gent, who mistakes Stanley's lodgings for their B&B in Felixstowe. The character is a trope, but Alan Jones played it with focus, good timing and warmth.

DIRECTION/PRODUCTION:

Lauren Carrigan, and her producer/co-director Sophie Mercer, were brave to take on such a complex and fast-paced comedy. Despite building up that pace rather too suddenly at the start, they gave us a riotous evening and the blocking was generally very good. Thank you for this much-needed laugh in these troubled times!

Best regards

Liz Mullen, accompanied by Kate Sheffield