

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD FULL LENGTH FESTIVAL 2023-2024

Name of Group: Brantham Amateur Dramatic Society

Play: Lark Rise

Author: Keith Dewhurst

Directed by: Philip STEWARD

Adjudicated by John Sanders

Date of performance JULY 3rd 2024

INTRODUCTION

What a good night out in a lovely old village hall.! On leaving, it was clear that the show had gone down well with the audience and it looked as if the actors had enjoyed it -which is what it is all about. It was a revelation to me that the Director and 3 other members of the cast had been in this same show which I saw performed by Harwich Youth Theatre more years ago than I care to remember.

FRONT OF HOUSE/PUBLICITY

I saw the posters around the village which looked good and I suspect that there will be full houses for each performance This is the best sign of a job well done.

The programme was well laid out, interesting and informative. However, some information regarding the date the play was set would have been helpful.

We had a good welcome from the lady managing the tickets, but had no other interaction with any front-of-house staff during my visit. I managed to buy a programme and some raffle tickets but the vendors were not obvious on arrival. The refreshments were fine and service was quite quick. The 'Wildflowers' acapella singing group were excellent with lovely sweet harmonies and set a great atmosphere for the show. It was a shame that some of the audience arrived too late for some of the songs. The group were less effective but just as harmonious during the interval, when people like to talk and shuffle around

Could there have been some rural artefacts to give but more atmosphere- corn dollies, wheatsheaves, bales etc?

I found the announcements at the beginning spoil the flow. Having been take in to the countryside and back in time with the 'Wildflowers', it felt a rude interruption to our journey. I don't know how it might have been done better. Perhaps the 'Wildflowers' could have done it. It would have given greater impact to the band's first tune and the start of the show.

SETTING

To my delight the show was performed with traverse staging. I love this format. The musicians were on the hall stage. I found that the separation of band from the rest of the action did not quite work for me. It was greatly improved in the second half, when the band came down from the stage for some songs. The hall is quite narrow and with action required behind the audience, it was probably not possible for the musicians to have been located in the centre of the audience, without reducing the relatively small capacity of the hall. This would have been my preference. However, the traverse mostly worked well.

Stage furniture, hand carts and benches were appropriate and well made. They gave a good feeling of period.

LIGHTING AND SOUND

The lighting was impressive, but without a lot of variation in colour or brightness. The traverse, and stage were very well lit. The scene changes were accurate. The lighting did not get in the faces of the audience which was an achievement. Unfortunately, it was not possible to light the action on entrances and on some of the dialogue when actors passed behind the audience 'hedges'. I liked the witch elder lighting but could more have been done in the two spotlights? Laura had a shadow of herself in the spot but Edmund did not. The shadow could have been used to great effect.

MUSIC

The band were very good to listen to. Not quite the Albion Band but very effective and joyous at times. Most musical interventions were nice and short. The timing of the music with the action was excellent My favourite pieces were 'John Dory' and 'Abroad for Pleasure'.

COSTUMES AND PROPS

I thought that costumes were generally well chosen and right for the time the play was set. The soldiers' uniforms added colour and difference when they were used. When we are close to and at the same level as the actors, it is easier to see the costumes and accessories. My companion and I felt that the men's shoes were not appropriate. They were too modern, clean and not boots. I felt more use could have been made of hats to point up the different characters

Managing the snuff box was clearly difficult and we were all very worried when the labourers came on with their formidable scythes. Were they real blades? Had someone done a safety check?

PRODUCTION

The direction was well conceived and thought out. Everyone knew their lines and movements. Little hesitation or stumbling over words. The traverse format does not help with voice projection and the excellent Oxford dialect also meant some passages were not really audible to the audience, many of whom would have found hearing difficult. The style of the play also meant that some passages were slow and drawn out, not helping the overall pace of the piece. I struggled to follow some sections of the play. Each scene could have been topped and tailed better to allow the action to be absorbed by the audience. Perhaps, it would have helped if characters moved a bit more especially in the conversation pieces.

All the characters were well defined and all had their own distinctive personalities. The ensemble playing was very good, I particularly liked the pub scene in the second act and I felt part of the crowd. Just like Sunday morning in my local.!

The movement flowed well and the arrival of the cart with the fish was particularly enjoyable. I was offered an apple. The centre of the traverse might have been used more and more movement might have avoided us seeing quite so many back views. However, I recognise the difficulties and, on the whole, the cast understood the problems and responded well.

RICHARD HEATH- Old Price, Dick, Grandfather

Some nice characters to play and they were all performed with an easy confidence. As grandfather, you knew he would be sympathetic to the many problems of Emma and would tease and play with the children. A decent kindly man. From my seat, I was unaware of the physical problems that ailed

him. Whilst each of the characters was different, they were all of the same age and I admit to being confused as to which one was in the action at any time. My problem, I think

JOHN HOSKYNS- Sam

As musician, singer and actor, he brought confidence and watchability to all he did. He seemed to drive the show. I really would have like to see him more in the body of the hall. He had a very good voice

PHILIP STEWARD- Boamer, John Price, Rector

It is always difficult to combine the role of director and actor. You have little opportunity to stand back and develop the show as director and you need to direct your own performances. John Price was a discomforting figure, just home from the war in his red jacket trying to reintegrate with village life. Boamer, on the other hand was the somewhat reluctant 'King of the Mowers', quite at home with the rest of the villagers. Philip brought interest and character to each of the roles. Diction was excellent

JOSIE RUDLAND- singer

Josie had a good voice, well suited to the songs, and led the Morris dancing with spirit and enthusiasm.

GENEVA DOWNS- Mrs. Peverill, Queenie Macey

Queenie had to do without her fix of snuff as the snuff box refused to open-it would have been empty anyway. Just another problem for the long- suffering lady with an unpleasant husband. Then the bees swarm! Lots of enthusiasm for chasing the bees, As Mrs Peverell, she was a very enthusiastic gossip and key member of the Ladies circle. Important part of the ensemble

AMELIA RAMSEY- Laura

Delivered the key speech at the beginning of the play with great diction and confidence Amelia had a lovely on-stage relationship with her brother and they never stopped acting. Being close to the action, we were able to see all her little games and distractions. She made the character strong and you could see the determination for success so desired by her mother

ROB WARNE- Mr. Morris, Jerry Parish, Landlord.

He was the centre of attention as the bailiff, Old Monday morning, as he organised the collection of the harvest. As the fruit and fish seller, Jerry Parrish he was unable to get much business. He could have tried harder to encourage all the audience to buy his tempting wares. I would have thought the village would have enjoyed his visits and the songs and banter he brought with them. I liked his 'tomatoes' song. He was also a very believable Landlord.

ALAN JONES- Twister, Tramp, Pumpkin

Dropping his trousers, he succeeded in shocking and disgusting us as Twister- he clearly was not mentally stable but the village supported him in spite of this problems. He gained our sympathy for his condition and also when he later played the pathetic role of the tramp and he was a strong performer as part of the labouring gang in the field and at the pub.

KEITH RABY- Old David, Major Sharman

I particularly liked Keith's performance in both his characters. The Major was a sorry sight but Keith played him with dignity and sensitivity Old David was more of a worker who came out of the shadows for the annual harvest. Nicely done

BEN WIKINSON- Fisher

Ben brought the enthusiasm and naivety of youth to the part. The butt of the jokes of the older men. He provided a real contrast with the older men and was always interesting to watch

MARK HINSON- Albert Timms, Squire Bracewell, Doctor.

Albert was the man who thought himself too good for the life he was leading in Lark Rise, trying to move on and better himself. Resentful, proud, not someone you could warm to. He was fond of his children and accepted that he and Emma had to struggle through. Mark played this troubled man very well and did what he had to do as Squire and Doctor entirely in keeping with the feel of the play.

ALEXIS ROSE-Edmund

Not easy to pick up the movement and voice of an 8-year-old boy. The details of the acting by this young person were to be admired. The facial expressions made a lot of interest for the audience Could have been a bit lighter on her feet, but this was a very good performance.

ELIZABETH DIAMOND- Martha Beamish

It is one of the best scenes in the play when Martha is interviewed by Mrs. Andrews. You really felt that this young girl was now on her own in an unknown world. You could just think of what lay in front of her. Elisabeth had the right blend of youthful inexperience but knew her place in the world of that time. It was what you did. Very believable.

LISA BUTLER- Emma Timms.

This was the character around whom the Timms family revolved. Lisa brought resolve and care to the role. You could see that she might have achieved more outside Lark Rise but this was her lot and she would do it to the best of her ability. She was a respected woman in the local community.. She would ensure her family did not starve. The somewhat difficult relationship with her and Albert was not overplayed but the tensions clearly existed. Unfussy and natural playing.

MIKE BROWN- Bishie, Postie and Cheapjack.

As Bishie, he was one of the labourers going to 'work his socks off' to bring in the harvest. The very spirit of the farm labourer. But as Cheapjack, he did his best to sell items to them beyond their means. He did this in a kindly way but always trying to get something out of it for himself. As Postie you could see that he knew all the secrets of the village. Interesting to watch in all 3 parts

JAYNE LINDELL- Garibaldi Jacket, Old Sally, Mrs. Andrews

Provided a strong contrast to the rest of the play when she appeared as the elegant Garibaldi Jacket. I felt that Martha Beamish would be safe in her hands – a good employer. In contrast, she was also Mrs. Andrews, the village gossip, and she seemed to relish this role. Old Sally was an intriguing character. All these characterisations were very well done,

CLARE FRASER HOPWOOD- Mrs. Beamish

The agonies of sending your child out into the unknown away from the village. Mrs. Beamish fussed over how she would look and present herself to the adult world and passing on advice. The economic necessities of the time gave her no choice. This actress worked well with the rest of the cast and gave a good idea of the problems of her position, especially with a new baby on the way.

ANGIE HEATH - Mrs Blaby, Mrs Spicer

Moved very well and always in character as Mrs. Blaby, a strong sensible woman Angie was very watchable and an important member of the ensemble. Not on long as Mrs. Spicer.

SUMMATION

This was a very good evening's entertainment. Great to see a different style of production played by competent actors in a nice setting.

John Sanders

Adjudicator