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Society: [Beaufort Players](#)
Venue: [Church of the Ascension Hall](#)
Credits: [Jessica Swale](#)
Type: [Sardines](#)
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Blue Stockings

Andrea Richardson | 09 Apr 2022 11:11am



A play on Victorian attitudes that is still relevant today

Blue Stockings is the 2013 debut play by Jessica Swale, which follows four strong-minded young women who decide to study at Cambridge and are determined to graduate with a degree. I was pleased to be welcomed back to Beaufort Players new production on this very important subject.

The term "blue stockings" refers to the historically derisive term for women who preferred literary and educational interests, opposing the principally male held view of the time that women were only suitable for getting married and raising families.

The play is set at Girton College, Cambridge, in 1896/97, and opens with a quote from the real life character of Dr Henry Maudsley, the leading British psychiatrist of the day: "It may be a pity for women that they are born women, but in running the intellectual race, it's unlikely they will succeed, and perilous to even try". This sort of attitude is one we find shocking today but gives a good sense of the story we are about to watch.

We meet the four girls who refuse to accept the expectation imposed on them to choose between education and love. Their teachers support them, putting their own future at risk, and there are links between the battle to fight for graduation and female suffrage.

There are always some actors who have more stage confidence and presence than others and in this large cast production there were a couple who could improve, but overall the actors did a great job on the night. The scenes kept pace, ensuring the audience were engaged and there were no apparent lines missed. The four actors in the role of our brave students certainly made Swales' punchy scrip ignite with their frustration at the misogyny, the inequality and the sheer arrogance of the people who object to their attempts to graduate. The scenes that worked best were the 'two-handers', where the relationships between different characters could be fully explored. I genuinely liked the character of Tess and her emotional journey, and equally hated the odious Lloyd with his foul attitude.

The set was basic but functional – flipping flats around and adding a simple picture to represent a room, an orchard or a lecture hall worked very effectively, especially as some scenes were very quick and required multiple changes in a short period of time. I also liked the choice of music in between the set changes – it was very reminiscent of a television period drama and fitted well.

The costumes were all period appropriate (at least to this reviewer with limited costume knowledge!) and everyone wore them well. The only glaring error for me was the opening scene using a modern design Raleigh bike.

The play ends with a shocking fact about how much longer it took for women to be 'allowed' to graduate from Cambridge. Prejudice is at the heart of this play, and although it is expressing the prevailing opinions of the time, it is unfortunate that this story is still relevant now. Women and girls still experience prejudice when trying to access education today and we must continue to fight that.

Congratulations to Melissa Riedel for her Directorial debut, and to all the cast and crew for a great production.