

BOWING OUT

by Alan Robinson

18th & 19th July 2008

“That was a really fun evening”, I overheard someone say at the end of “Bowing Out”, an interactive murder mystery which was the Beaufort Players’ latest production. How right they were, as it was a highly entertaining production.

Alan Robinson, one of the group’s members, who wrote and directed it, clearly has considerable talent. His script was full of twists and turns, dark secrets, red herrings and witty (often very saucy!) lines, with wonderfully over-the-top characters.

The show consisted of a fast-moving three-act play with an excellent meal served in the intervals. During these, letters and newspaper cuttings relevant to the mystery were handed out. At the end, the audience was given a chance to question the characters on stage before being invited to fill in “who-dunnit” forms for a prize. Then the proceedings ended with a closing scene in which a police inspector gradually revealed the murderer. It was a formula that worked very well.

The play was set in a derelict theatre where someone (but who?) had locked the doors and cut off the phones. Ten people had gathered there on the anniversary of the death of Sly Sparkle, an evil theatrical producer/casting-coucher who had disappeared off a cliff top - but did he fall or was he pushed? All had dark secrets in their past and, having suffered at his hands, a strong motive for doing him in, but had been promised a share of his estate if they gathered to perform his final masterpiece.

The pace never flagged throughout, helped by imaginative colourful costumes and confident performances. With so much going on, it was no surprise when Sly himself turned up, albeit in a large costume hamper with a dagger in his back. There was also a woman claiming to be his wife though she didn’t last long either as a mix-up with pill bottles soon put paid to her. And one of the characters turned out to be an earlier wife and another his son. At least I think that’s what happened, as the plot got very complicated at times, not helped by the tendency of some of the cast to gabble their lines. But no matter, it was all great fun.

Full marks to Gemma Breakell for her disturbingly realistic performance as a quivering drug-wrecked starlet and Katherine Dixon as a splendidly imperious surgically-enhanced but faded leading lady. June Burgess was an exuberantly brash Northern soap star, Lindsay Anne Cumming solidly down-to-earth as a back-stage scrubber and Lisa Morris dishily glamorous as a post sex-change Russian temptress. Martin Roe made a convincing once-famous luvvie, Matt Tylianakis was a very French businessman, Chris Sinclair a credible rising movie star, James King a rough “Big Brother” winner, Russell Gillman an impossibly camp wardrobe mistress and Laura Wood the bouncy over-dressed widow.

Compared with this bizarre group, the police inspector (played by Krystyna Kobiak) who acted as MC for the evening, seemed rather plain and uninspiring. If she had been more authoritative, incisive and sharper dressed, I felt she would have provided a more interesting contrast to the others and hence provided a stronger start and finish to the show.

As always with the Beaufort Players, the front-of-house arrangements were highly professional, though I was disappointed by the silly “biographies” printed for some of the cast in the otherwise top-class programme. When actors give such vivid performances, I want to be able to read who they really are.

John Harrison