



Society : Beaufort Players  
Production : Night Must Fall  
Date : 25<sup>th</sup> March 2011  
Venue : Church of the Ascension Hall  
Report by : Tony Austin (NODA Rep for London District 8)

## Report

Asked to deputise at the last minute for your current Regional Rep, I was only available to see the first performance you were giving of the classic thriller by Emlyn Williams, but must congratulate your Director **Diana Dishley** and her cast on the thorough learning process which meant that every cast member seemed secure in dialogue and moves, and not even put off by a mobile phone ringing in the auditorium (despite the clearest of pre-show announcements) or the succession of aeroplanes apparently only just overhead on their way to or from Heathrow (oh, for a no-fly zone here!).

Written at a time when Williams's reputation as an actor was lagging behind his success as a playwright, and with the lead role designed to project him into stardom (with the very pleasing result, according to *Who's Who in the Theatre*, of a run of 435 performances at the Duchess Theatre starting in 1935, followed by a further 205 at the much larger Cambridge Theatre in 1936), the author's determination that its reputation should be as a psychological thriller and in no way classed as a Whodunit led to him write the chilling prologue of the judgement given by the House of Lords, then the highest Court in our land, rejecting the character's final appeal against the death penalty. I had not heard that speech before, as the prologue was omitted from the only production I have seen, but the measured tones in which it was presented by **John Harrison**, in the unseen role of the Lord Chief Justice, could not have been bettered (as one would have expected following all his BBC experience). I am not sure whether the echoey effect was the result of him being in a bare-walled room or produced electronically to simulate a court; regrettably it sounded like a railway station.

Without a believable performance in the lead role, there would be no point in putting on the play and **Alan Robinson** gave us the full works as Dan, managing credibility as the saucy bellhop at the start, as the confident liar thereafter and as the troubled psychopath of the final scenes. Playing the character with a London accent makes much more sense in an Essex setting than the original Welsh (only there because the author was Welsh), but even the copyright holders could surely not object if a Welsh accent is not practicable to the omission both of the description of his origins (and wasn't the description used a slight deviation from the script anyhow?) and of the word Cardiff when the Docks were mentioned? The ingratiating behaviour in between was put over with assurance and quite enough rough charm to impress (and give considerable comfort to) a vain old lady, and his taunting of Olivia had the right sexual innuendo. His collapse and other physical demonstrations of his inner demons were well done – was the character perhaps an undiagnosed epileptic? A fine performance, leaving us with questions about his motives at all stages – as the author intended.

I took some time to believe in **Jayne Bowman**'s Mrs Bramson, plainly not a wrinkled old lady in her grey wig, and being in a wheelchair naturally restricted in movements to reinforce the aging. (I am not an expert on old wheelchairs, only observing that this one did look in mint condition, and if it really was *donated* by the British Museum, perhaps the Players could earn money advising the Greek Government!) It was well manoeuvred by its various handlers in the restricted space, although occasionally on exit there was a slight pause which one felt sure would in reality have been filled with more demands or acerbic comments from its occupier, as streamed from her with great skill and emphasis when in static mode. Her final scenes with Dan were very powerful, by which time her performance had banished doubts about her age – though we knew she could walk.

One effect of the Prologue was that our small, mature audience got into a serious mood and was not willing to accept that the light touch, with which the opening scene introducing all other cast members was written, was an indication that laughter, or even nervous giggles, would be in order. Perhaps later audiences were less constrained, but I would have hoped for a huge laugh from the exchange “You’re going to have a child. When?”/”Last August Bank Holiday”. As it was we sat silently through their well-written introductions, at least I hope fully attentive to the proceedings.

**Lisa Morris** as Olivia, niece and companion to Mrs Bramson and the butt of most of her jibes, soon got across to us her impossible predicament, perhaps difficult to understand in modern times, of being trapped in her aunt’s service unless rescued by a man, but feeling she would be as trapped again if that man were dull and earnest Hubert. Her initial disdain for Dan and her bridling at his taunts were well shown, as was the hint of something more underneath, and as she claimed ownership of the belt and then the hatbox (with its grisly contents) her fascination for the strange allure of the young man became clear, culminating in the passionate kiss after his arrest, really shocking in 1935 and still disturbing in these days. Her serious suitor Hubert Laurie, a standard silly-fool role of the period (though I thought the moustache came from several decades earlier), was really well played by **Russell Gillman**, who despite being denied by a jealous author even a decent exit line will have the last laugh in July. (Best wishes to the happy couple for their future!)

**Gemma Breakwell** was lovely as Dora, the maid, though having got her pregnant the author (and his role) rather seemed to forget about her. Accepting stoically that Dan would be unlikely to marry her, she still bestowed on him a really besotted smile – but perhaps that owed more to their offstage relationship. Housekeeper “Mrs T” gave **Kate Martin** the chance to stand up to her employer with some home truths, nicely delivered but ignored of course, and necessary revelations to advance the plot, and I think it was she who had the classic line about the headless corpse that at least she hadn’t been *interfered* with. **Roger Dishley**’s lines as Inspector Belsize did seem rather old fashioned (as perhaps they should after 70-odd years) but were delivered clearly and with meaning. But in view of the current series of cases of flawed police investigations into multiple murders, perhaps his methods are not as dated as they might seem. Nurse Libby’s brief appearances to tend to the invalid didn’t give **June Burgess** a chance to star but added a nice professional presence on Dan’s collapse.

The full impact of *Night Must Fall* relies on the cultivation of a realistic atmosphere of suspicion and terror not only by the performances of the actors but in the technical aspects of the production, and I’m sorry to say that I found those aspects disappointing in a number of ways, not all of which could be put down to budgetary considerations. Not having seen any previous plays by the Players and being unfamiliar with their organisation and how the responsibilities are divided between the many people whose names are shown in their fine programme, I have decided not to give individual plaudits or brickbats but to congratulate anonymously the good work which was an asset to the production while mentioning some more of the things I found disturbing. I have to start with the set which had some touches of realism, but more completely unreal elements which defied anyone obtaining the sense of claustrophobia felt by an old woman left alone in the woods, with a centre back entrance reaching to the flies and no scenic backing but just a red stage curtain, together with another open doorway with only a black backing, and both door frames and the skirting board of unpainted modern softwood. (Could this really be the same Group the reversal of whose set for *Noises Off* features in the glorious stop-time video on their website?) Then what terrible roses, what an unsuitably tiny cash box for all Mrs Bramson’s life savings in a cupboard which could never be a dresser as it was referred to, a period gramophone stopped by closing the lid without taking off the needle and at least one costume of an inappropriate class for its wearer. I’m afraid I could go on.

However, I have no complaint about the welcome from a variety of Players old and young Front of House and from their surviving member from the Group’s foundation in 1962 among the audience.