



Society : Beaufort Players
Production : A Murderous Lot
Date : 20 - 21 July
Venue : The Church of the Ascension Hall, Beaufort Road, Ealing W5 3EB
Report by : Zena Wigram (District 2)

Report

This play is a little tricky to review (Beaufort Players do believe in making their NODA reps work, don't you?) because I feel I should comment on both the play and the performance, which made an enjoyable evening of murder.

Author **Thomas Cobb** had created an ingenious and mind-taxing plot. That the audience had to work out not 'whodunnit' but rather 'whydunnit-and-to-whom' was most unusual, and very cleverly planned. Unfortunately, the plot was a little too complex: too much had had to be crammed into too short a time. (You may have noticed that the more successful Agatha Christie adaptations tend to be of short stories, rather than novels, where vast swathes of action have to be left out.) Cutting some of the action, such as the tango at the start, and even perhaps one of the red herrings, would have left a little more time for some of the information to be fed to us gradually, rather than needing some of the rather long speeches: despite the best efforts of the cast, these tended to feel contrived. Not having to rush through lots of exposition might have given time to make the dialogue a little more natural, too. Dare I suggest that having a separate director to the author might have helped? That said, the evening's entertainment had been extremely well planned, with the pauses for the two intervals and the auction neatly incorporated, and the seaside-postcard humour contributing excellently to the fun.

The programme, designed by **Thomas Cobb**, who also directed the play, explained the proceedings clearly, and gave amusing and interesting background information. Thomas also designed the magnificent set, which had been beautifully built by the 'Beaufort Builders' and arranged by **Alex Cumming** and the crew, under stage manager **Jayne Quill** – even when people slammed doors there was only the faintest quiver of the walls. I felt it would have been improved by another chair or two, because there was a lot of awkward standing around by the members of the cast – often in a row or a semi-circle, which didn't look natural. It would also have been good to have a little more interest in the thrust on stage left, where the auction took place, which was rather bare, particularly when compared to the details in the main 'room'. Both the main stage and the thrust were well lit, despite problems with the lighting desk, which were admirably overcome by the Lighting team of **Pete Balls** and **Chris Burns**. Appropriate sound effects and background music by Sound designer **Roger Dishley** were neatly supportive – the scrape of the record player was perfectly timed.

The evening opened with the confession by Arthur (**Matthew Carpenter**) to having poisoned someone. He presented this startling fact beautifully, with a warm voice and perfectly rounded vowels. He should try not to lean back on his heel and lift his toe – it made him look a little weak, and was very obvious when his feet were at the audience's eye-level! He could have worked on a little more light and shade for his character – for instance, he seemed to be always snapping angrily at Robert, supposedly a most important client: some oily charm or condescending superiority would have added variety. His management of the auction was a highlight – it was well written and extremely well done. Congratulations to **June Burgess** for meeting the challenge of the props list!

George (**Martin Roe**) and Anne (**Tania Hunt**) began the 'goings on' with a remarkable tango – though I felt that the choreography by **Rachel Thorn** was a bit over-challenging for less-experienced singers to manage while presenting information to us. Both accomplished actors, they managed the exposition

well, both here and later, and gave us a very believable relationship. Martin's reactions to Kimberley later made his womanising past very believable, and Tania was particularly good in the improvised discussions during the breaks and when the plot was revealed.

Arthur's sister Georgina (**Annie Lord**) was perhaps a little too sulky – could she have made the character more sympathetic? – but she gave a consistent performance, and she was an excellent (poisoned!) drunk.

David and Kimberley Slay (**Chris Sinclair** and **Jackie Oates**) worked well together as the brother and sister pair. Jackie's accent slipped only very slightly and very occasionally, and her seduction of 'George' was particularly well done. She looked lovely in her green dress, but perhaps a pocket or handbag would have made it less obvious that she carried her phone around for just as long as it took to establish – for the purpose of the plot – that there was no signal at Beaufort Manor: it was never seen again thereafter. Chris lounged around the stage well – though I felt he should perhaps have offered his seat to his fiancée - and I was impressed with how he managed the ending sequence.

Angela North, as clumsy housekeeper Alex, said her lines clearly, despite her obvious inexperience, which I think led her to feel quite tense throughout. I wasn't entirely convinced by her make-up, which seemed heavier than that of the other characters.

Robert Fanshaw Jr (**Russell Gillman**) did extremely well with a consistent American accent and lively Texan loudmouth character.

Jayne Bowman was good as sour Angelica Grimes, though I felt she could also have added more light and shade – because she was always sour, she seemed more one-dimensional than necessary. I see from her programme notes that she was glad not to be wearing a wig, but in fact I would have changed her hairstyle: the character seemed to demand a bun or chignon, and it was a little odd that her blonde pony-tail mirrored Georgina's so closely.

As loud-mouthed Joe Jordan, **Martin Perrott** enlivened the action with a lovely larger-than-life presence. To be even better, he and Jackie could both work on standing still, and moving only when there is a real reason to do so.

Thomas Cobb's direction tended to suggest his inexperience, but the entrances and exits were slick and well-rehearsed. I was particularly impressed with how consistently the cast members stayed in character during the meal and the questioning, and how they managed to enjoy the (delightfully) cheesy gags without labouring them.

The food was plentiful and beautifully (and charmingly) served – and, I'm told, was extremely good quality: the catering team (**Elaine Cobb** and **Elaine O'Sullivan**) had done an excellent job.

Congratulations to you all for another great team effort, and good luck for *Ladies' Day* in November.

Zena Wigram
District 2