



Society : Beaufort Players
Production : For the Chop
Date : 21 November 2014
Venue : The Church of the Ascension Hall, Beaufort Road, Ealing W5 3EB
Report by : Zena Wigram (District 2)

Report

Thank you for inviting me to yet another evening of Beaufort theatre, this time in an exceedingly clever parody of all the cookery programmes that seem to dominate the TV schedules. Despite the fact that I have watched very little of them, even I recognised the pastiche characters, and enjoyed their silly innuendoes very much.

Starting with a very enjoyable (and necessary) safety announcement about the fire alarm, the whole play was filled with energy, and therefore the small criticisms below – offered in the hope that they are helpful – are really picky: very few of the audience would have done anything other than enjoy the nonsense.

Jenny (**Lainy Cobb**) was attractive and believable; she just needed to slow her dialogue down: remember that an accent makes it a little harder to understand the words, and there were times when she rather swallowed the punch-line of her jokes. I felt she was a bit too assured for someone really nervous and unprepared to do a stand-up routine with no warning, but I enjoyed the comments about the church hall very much, and she handled the audience well. She needed either to talk to the lighting team about changing the lighting, or to learn to look into the light – when she shaded her eyes to see the audience members, it made her face invisible. Perhaps she dwelt a little too long on the first audience member: try to make sure you move on well before you start to make them feel uncomfortable, because that's hard on them and will also make other people uneasy. I really liked the subtlety of the hints such as the unbuttoned shirt and the flower in her hair to indicate the nature of the 'career-building discussion' offered by Clive.

As the oleaginous Clive Mastadon, **Séin Ô Muineacháin** was a triumph from the moment of his delightful entry: perfect as the self-seeking TV host. **Alan Robinson**, too, gave a lovely performance as poor fraught Charlie, managing to be crazed without becoming tedious, drugged without being inaudible, and responding well to some unscripted difficulties as well as those thrown at him by the author.

Arabella Donna (**June Burgess**) revelled in the double entendres and in flirting with Clive – though there were a few times when she forgot that she was facing upstage and the volume made it hard to hear everything. I particularly enjoyed her facial expressions when unexpectedly left alone to deal with the starter, and later when reading the recipe to respond to the questions – that was very good indeed: just subtle enough to make it feasible that he didn't know that she hadn't a clue, but clear enough for us all to see she was reading Susan's instructions. Unfortunately, although her hair fiddling was clearly part of her flirtation, I felt it jarred with the plot. Forgive me if I'm wrong and N*** does constantly push her hair back, but I would refuse to eat anything prepared by a chef so constantly touching her hair, and I'm sure George would have taught her otherwise.

I'm not entirely sure why I felt that **Gemma Robinson** as Arabella's assistant Susan had a hard job with her character – sometimes she seemed cowed and at other times she was extremely self-possessed. I enjoyed her credible stirring and whisking preparations while Arabella left her to get on with the job. Her murderous rage in the tower was well done, and overcame the ridiculousness of the

situation. Pierre Gaston (**Sophie Buda**) had some lovely facial expressions, proving when appropriate that you can have a positive impact on stage without saying a word. I've made the same note for her as for Jenny regarding an accent: slow down to make sure we can hear. I was not convinced she had to let her hair loose to show us her gender - we'd got that joke ages ago! – and then she didn't manage to get it as neatly tied up so she, too, had to push it out of her eyes. Later in the tower, of course, it didn't matter, and the flying hair worked well as part of the struggle.

Martin Perrott as her colleague Andy Sword gave us a beautiful repetition of his insistence on 'good quality plain no frills cooking' followed by ridiculous recipes - he sounded as if he really believed himself. He did well in showing aggression to Arabella, but needs to be careful about shifting from foot to foot – sometimes the discomfort it portrayed was most appropriate, but at times it made him look weak.

Russell Gillman as the third chef, Alfie Stockwell, had great energy and enthusiasm, and was amusingly dim. I loved the way he showed his own hypocrisy regarding other countries (beautifully written as well as well acted), the way he addressed Clive as 'Masto' (ditto), and also the way he redid his hair using the spoon held by his assistant. He also endured glasses of water being thrown on him after his realistic faint. **Elaine O'Sullivan**, as his assistant Steffi Pumpnickel, gave us a lovely uptight humourless scientist but, again, it wasn't always easy to hear her dialogue: as well as being hampered by a (consistent) German accent, she had a tendency to drop the ends of her sentences.

All six of the chefs had obviously done a lot of rehearsal and were really credible in their preparation and cooking throughout the whole play. Alfi and Steffi had to work harder to be heard, being so far upstage, whereas the others had to be more careful, being closer to the audience

Kelly (**Di Harvey-Judd**) also needed to work a little harder on clarity: I'm not sure she appreciated quite how much a tannoy distorts the voice. It was good to see her at the end - although she seemed rather glamorous for the drunken assistant producer!

I appreciate that I've mentioned enunciation several times: generally, be very careful when you are set upstage: the further back you are, the more slowly and clearly you have to speak to let us hear. In a completely new play, no-one in the audience will ever have heard your lines before, so you have to allow a bit of time for them. Also, in a comedy full of innuendo and one-liners, it's more important that the audience hears everything than in a drama, where the general thrust of the action can carry through some inaudible lines, and the general story will still be obvious. I'm sure I missed a number of jokes because I couldn't quite keep up with the quick-fire delivery, and as well as the moment of support by prompt **Diana Dishley** (extremely well picked up by the people involved) there were times where I had the impression of lost lines; it's always easier to remember your lines if you give yourself a little time!

The technical aspects of the production were first-class – Director and Playwright **Thomas Cobb** noted justly in his introduction the complexity of the staging, and for all that, it was excellent. The triple kitchens were filled with detail and had sinks that – with appropriate sound effects – appeared to have running water, and the opening side of the green room, and the clock tower above it, were astonishing. Major congratulations to Producer **Lisa Morris**, set designers Thomas himself and **Alan Robinson**, and the props team of **Alan Robinson** and **Kate Martin**, as well as to **Pete Balls** for clever lighting, always in the right place at the right time, and extremely well managed sound by **Roger Dishley**, including clever countdown music for the splendid cleaver of the timer by **Russell Gillman**. Although there were times when the blue and red ovens swayed when an incautious cast member bumped them, I loved the real smoke from the red kitchen's oven. Skilful arrangements of scenery and multiple props hid the 'cooking', with a convincing chicken and even white and yellow something (paint?) in the bowls during the whisking.

I was also very impressed by the tremendously skilled video work (uncredited), from the opening sequence to the recap at the end. (It was just slightly unfortunate that Arabella's costume had changed after recording.) All the costumes on stage, by **Lisa Morris** and **Krystyna Kobiak**, were perfect, from beautifully-made aprons, to Clive's suitably only-just over-the-top outfit and Arabella's too tight shirt. Make-up was good, too, although I felt Jenny's make-up base was a bit too heavy. The cleanly laid out programme by **Russell Gillman** and **Krystyna Kobiak**, complete with food loves and hates and recipes at the back, was very amusing.

Playwright Thomas had clearly done a great deal of TV watching research before writing this clever and funny parody. I offer the following suggestions with some diffidence, given I couldn't possibly do it myself!

I think the play as a whole was around 15 mins too long. Trimming Act I and Act II would have allowed more time for the exposition in Act III, which felt was a bit rushed, and where the explanations were a bit confusing. (Were some lines missed? I didn't actually hear Arabella confess to not being able to cook – at least, not explicitly.) On the other hand, it probably felt quite long enough for the two girls silently fighting in the tower, managing to look deadly but at the same time not pull focus from the explanations below them, for which I congratulate them both most sincerely. Had Act I been shorter, it might have been possible to manage without the first interval – the changes to the set were minimal, and potentially a short black-out might have done; but I can see that it might have been a very long first half without it. Some judicious pruning would have helped: 'plucky newcomer' and 'only ever use plain fresh good-quality ingredients' were clever and pointed, but by the fifth or so repetition had started to pall somewhat. I think I might have subtitled the play just 'Culinary comedy' because I felt that waiting for a murder scene detracted somewhat from just enjoying the nonsense and innuendo.

The audience involvement was fun, but it was a little confusing having two catchphrases to use with different cues, so there were times when it felt a little laboured. The interaction with voting cards was well arranged. I got the impression, though I may be mistaken, that the results announced at the end of each round really were based on the cards, and that Thom had written an additional explanation to cause Alfie to drop out, for use only if the voting required it. As in fact we in the audience couldn't really see who was voting for which chef, that may not have been necessary, but it was certainly slickly done.

Congratulations to you all for another great team effort, a lot of fun and a most enjoyable evening.

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