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Society : Beaufort Players
Production : Death in High Heels
Date : 23 July 2016
Venue : Church of the Ascension Hall, Ealing
Report by : Zena Wigram, district 2

[Show report](#)

Thank you for inviting me to enjoy yet another lovely evening of theatre, and for the warm welcome from Roger and Diana Dishley and (Producer for this play) Elaine O'Sullivan. It was great to see the display of (well deserved) certificates from the recent NODA awards, too.

The background 1930s music set the scene before the show started. Roger Dishley's music was at the perfect level for background as the audience entered, and later covered all the scene changes without any obvious repetition. It was all managed perfectly, like the beautifully timed sound effects. The lighting by Jane Quill and Pete Balls was also unobtrusively excellent, with everyone lit to best effect across the whole playing area including behind the double doors leading to the shop floor.

The set, by Thomas Cobb, Ana Bretes, Chris Burns, Alan Robinson and the Beaufort Builders, was a triumph. Stairs, doors, rails were all attractive and fully functional, with proper latching doors and beautifully scribed names on the office doors. Beautiful dress design drawings and a rail of glamorous clothes, plus a full length mirror and traditional desk, showed a successful shop. The little stools used later were more functional than beautiful; however, their neat stacking and easy movement was a good compromise on the small stage. Director Krystyna Kobiak managed all the multiple entrances and exits to good effect, all combining seamlessly to give the bustling back room of a classy store.

An assortment of period props by Elaine O'Sullivan included a pack of 'Lucky Strike' cigarettes, an old toothbrush, and a splendid newspaper. I liked the way the newspaper story was discussed while subtly ensuring the audience couldn't see that section, and I was also impressed by the skill of those people who appeared to smoke without actually doing so.

As well as directing, Krystyna Kobiak had arranged really beautiful costumes – as appropriate for this piece! There was a remarkable array of period costumes, fitting well, and it was impressive that mannequin Aileen looked good in all of the numerous dresses she was required to wear. Her tights were appropriately seamed (as were those of at least one of the other women I spotted) but she could have worn stockings and suspenders rather than tights. While one or two of the characters' shoes weren't perfect (in particular, I really felt that Dorian would have worn polished black shoes rather than scuffed brown shoes with his beautiful black, silver and purple outfit - and purple silk handkerchief), Miss Doon and Miss Gregory in particular were complete to the last accessory. Their dresses were beautiful, and fitted perfectly, and their nails, hair, shoes, lipstick all worked together.

Ladies would have worn gloves and hats outdoors, so it was a shame Miss Gregory and Mrs Best weren't wearing (or carrying) hats as well as wearing gloves when they entered or left. That would have supported the plot line of Mrs Gay having to clean her hat. As appropriate, Mrs Gay was wearing a ring, but I didn't see a wedding ring on Mrs Best, who told us as part of the dialogue that she was a widow.

(Consider it a compliment to the high standard of your theatre that I notice tiny details!) I liked the pearl necklaces on a number of the women, and I really enjoyed Mrs Best's glasses, which she used well. Mr Bevan's beautifully knotted tie with its subtle pattern, double breasted jacket and polished shoes all looked perfect, and his lovely upright carriage perfectly supported his smart turnout and emphasised his role as couturier and boss.

While there was some good work on period hair, and some red lipstick, perhaps there wasn't time for Bryony Wood and her team to get to all of the large cast. It would have been good to have more finger waved hair sprayed solidly into place on the women, and heavier make-up on eyes as well as lips. I was surprised that mannequin Aileen wore the least make-up and the most naturalistic hairstyle: her character would usually be expected to be the most painted and curled. The men could have had slightly longer hair (which I appreciate isn't always easy for people who have to turn up at an office job during the day!) however I was impressed with the way they were all slicked down with grease.

The piece was well-cast, and it was super to see how everyone presented completely different characters, so we emphatically did not have an amorphous group of beautiful women, but could easily tell them apart. It is better to avoid straight lines or neat semi-circles – if you do end up in a line, at least aim to have the spacing different, with some people closer together than others, to avoid a suggestion of a carefully plotted row.

Mary Hill was a delightful senior saleswoman Irene Best, prim and prissy but supportive of dogsbody Rose Macinery. Vicky Prior had clearly put a lot of work into not-very-bright Rose, with a good accent and cautious slowness of movement and dialogue.

April Parker made self-centred Aileen Wheeler delightfully laid back (including super work on her shiny red nails) and I really enjoyed her suggestive hints to the Inspector. Her confession about her background was sincere. As Inspector David Charlesworth, Piers Garnham's beautifully rounded vowels contrasted well with Jayne Bowman's accent as cynical Sergeant Lilian Wyler, and they both had lovely facial expressions – the Sergeant's glower and rolled eyes were very funny. The handsome inspector was definitely the hero of the piece and we wanted him both to solve the murder and get the girl.

Mintu Miah was a handsome Frank Bevan, and his acting showed clearly that the selfish boss was more concerned about his profits and the length of time his store was closed than about the murder. Mintu could have taken just a little more time with his dialogue – people in power don't have to rush.

Russell Gillman was amusing as an extremely camp Dorian Pouvier. While the audience enjoyed the nonsense, it could have been a little more subtle – bearing in mind homosexuality was illegal at this period – to give more credence to Dorian's motive. Mind you, I do accept that the play isn't written as a detailed character study! It was a pity that after insisting that Aileen don the 'navy dress' he then didn't really take any notice of it once she had done so, and she stood in it for a minute or two before taking it off again. His enunciation was beautiful and clear.

Kate Martin was a splendidly bitchy Caroline Doon, with suitably harsh accent which worked very well having moved from New Zealand to southern America, and was consistent throughout. Her blood-spattered handkerchief and stagger down the stairs made a most convincing death. Tania Hunt was her bullying rival Zelda Gregory; her confession was extremely well done, and she managed to be unattractive yet sincere.

It was astonishing to learn that Gemma Robinson had had so few rehearsals – while dealing with a baby not yet four months old - before playing Rachel Gay. Her acting was excellent, and she had clearly worked incredibly hard to learn it all in just two weeks; her work plus the support of her fellow cast members meant she had no need of prompt Diana Dishley.

Alan Robinson managed the scene changes quickly and quietly. Russell Gillman and Krystyna Kobiak had set out an informative and neatly laid-out programme; they might have considered listing the scenes to clarify the dates and times to the audience.

The bows had been well plotted, but I suggest you don't applaud one another – a play is a team effort, so it's nicer to accept audience appreciation gracefully as a group, and then thank one another backstage. You definitely deserved both the audience applause and mutual congratulations after this most enjoyable performance.

Zena Wigram
District 2