

Season's Greetings – Review by Lance Bassett

For the first production of their 2017/2018 season, Banbury Cross Players presented this cracker from the pen of Alan Ayckbourn. A staple production for amateur groups, 'Season's Greetings' is a whirlwind of chaos, pathos and hilarity set in five scenes over the four day Christmas holiday period.

Ayckbourn's incisive insight into what can happen when a family is holed up together in the drink fuelled claustrophobic atmosphere of Christmas must have been drawn from experience somewhere in the Ayckbourn household archives.

The assorted characters are well drawn and none more so than Harvey, the retired ex-security man who packs a gun as well as his suitcase when he goes a-visiting. Better keep an eye on him. The part was played faultlessly by Andy Allen, intense and expressive and I certainly wouldn't want to be stuck in a lift with him for a start.

The play is set entirely in the house of Neville and Belinda. He, the self-employed electrical engineer, seldom to be seen without a screwdriver in his hand, and Belinda the glue of the household trying to keep the family together over this harrowing time. Janice Lake as Belinda was perfect casting, looking and sounding the part of the harassed matriarch constantly thwarted by Neville, who would always prefer to repair faulty electricals or go down the pub with son-in-law Eddie than help Belinda with the festivities.

Again Dave Candy as Neville was well cast. He convinced the audience he wasn't quite on Belinda's wavelength and seemed such an easy-going soul until later in the story when he was crossed and he showed a darker side to his nature.

The character who did the crossing was visiting author Clive. Now Clive is regarded as a literary giant by the family, Rachel (Belinda's sister) and possibly himself. Rachel, the eternal spinster, fancies her chances with Clive, but I reckon she should have gone to Specsavers as Clive should have done before purchasing that suit and shoes that would embarrass Coco the Clown.

Despite the wardrobe malfunction Dave Robinson as Clive put in rather a jolly performance, skilfully avoiding Rachel's advances and I thought occasionally slipping into the ghost of Norman Wisdom, I expected his famous deck chair sketch at one point.

Rachel, played by the ever-reliable Helena Boughton was spot-on as the frustrated, frumpy old maid (no offence Helena) and came over well in her quest for the evasive Clive.

Simon Grey as Eddie put in an outstanding performance for such a young chap. Confident clear and word perfect it seemed. Well done that man.

His ever-pregnant wife Pattie was harassed and came over exactly as that, as we all would be married to someone who didn't really want to be in her world.

Finally we come to Bernard and Phyllis. Bernard, a not a very good doctor, was played by Terry Andrews. I got the feeling, rightly or wrongly, Terry was very nervous or an outstanding actor. I'm still not sure which. However his dithering and sometimes lack of volume was compensated by his puppet show fiasco, excellent. Frankly I think he could work this up into a full-time professional act, rather like a latter day Tommy Cooper, he'd make a fortune.

I digress. Phyllis (Debby Andrews) was Bernard's frustrated wife who really preferred playing board games with Clive than bored games with Bernard. I must mention here her great first entrance with a bleeding nose and half of an Andrex roll up her nose, absorbing.

The scenery design was a masterpiece, using every last inch of the stage. An impressive Christmas tree, which must have been 12ft high, dominated the set liberally dressed with yuletide decorations. Congratulations all round to set designers and builders.

Directed by Trish Thompson, take a bow Trish, 'Season's Greetings' can be carved with pride into the roll call of BCP productions. As an added bonus this was the first BCP performance at the Mill since new seating was installed. Only folk who ever sat on the old ones will know the relief this entails.

Lance Bassett