

FOR SARDINES MAGAZINE

The Odd Couple (female version)

Written by Neil Simon, Directed by Liz Riley

Society/company: Banbury Cross Players

Performance date: 17 Jul 2013

Venue: The Mill Arts Centre, Spiceball Pk Road, Banbury, OX16 5QE

Reviewer/s: Alex Wood (Independent review)

Most people have seen *The Odd Couple*, either as a film or a play. A needy man moves in with a slob who lives in a house which is a mess, bringing his obsession for order and cleanliness with him. This apparently symbiotic relationship breaks down when the slob realises that he cannot stand his partner's overbearing fussiness any longer.

Neil Simon's sequel to this simple but very witty idea, *The Odd Couple (Female Version)* worked just as well, if not better, in the very capable hands of the Banbury Cross Players.

The set – in a challengingly wide but relatively shallow space - was excellent, with the serendipitous support of the weather which meant the audience did not have to use any effort to imagine themselves as being in Olive Madison's apartment on a 'hot summer evening'!

The play opens with Olive's friends playing *Trivial Pursuits*, at the same time bemoaning her skills as a host, especially her cavalier approach to the 'use by' dates of the snacks she offers them.

Lorna Gemmell played Mickey the New York cop with the exactly the authority needed, Jan Batchelor was just right as the gossip-loving Renee ("I'm seeing a doctor." "Is it something serious?" "No, it's only been a couple of dates.") and Linda Shaw as Sylvie, sitting back, watching the others with an air of mild amusement and a wisecrack always at hand, set just the right tone. Ann Westcott, playing Vera, made the most of the part of the silver-haired (and well-coiffed) senior of the group, whose unsuspecting, slightly out-of-touch, pronouncements and her friends' reactions to them made for lots of laughs. In starting the play this quartet set the tone for the rest of the show and they did it very well.

Trish Thompson struck just the right note as Olive, a successful TV presenter who is happy to admit that she has no interest in home-making. But she has a kind side to her nature, sending money to help out her hopeless ex (his whimper on the phone always gets to her – in spite of her friends' chorus of 'Don't's in the background) and when Florence comes round distraught having left her husband she offers her a room. One or two first night errors but overall Trish did very well with this demanding part. Janice Lake was also totally believable as the other half of this odd couple, the neurotic, compulsive Florence.

I was impressed by the accents which were both accurate and consistent.

If that was not enough the audience had another treat in store when Olive (desperate for male company – though that may be putting it too subtly!) invites Spanish neighbours Manolo (Ian Nutt) and Jesus (Philip Fine) for dinner, to be prepared by Florence, of course. Ian and Philip made a superb double act and their chat with Florence was hilarious. Lesser actors would have relied lazily on Simon's very funny lines based around confusions about language and culture to get their laughs but it was obvious that they had worked very hard to perfect their roles and this added a polish to the humour which made the scene unforgettable.

It's no wonder that the play concludes with Florence leaving Olive's place to stay with these two genuinely charming men for a 'couple of days'...or more?

Special commendation should also go to the stage crew who not only did a magnificent job of tidying Olive's flat in the interval but also set up and took down the props for dinner at each end of Act 2 Scene 2 so efficiently – not easy in the dark, in front of an audience and under pressure to do it as fast as possible.

Like the other two plays I have had the pleasure of reviewing in this year's Banbury Cross Players season this one was of a very high standard and much enjoyed by the audience. Well done!