

National Operatic & Dramatic Association      London Region

Society                    :      Banbury Cross Players  
Production                :      Jack Absolute Flies Again  
Date                        :      7<sup>th</sup> March 2026  
Venue                      :      The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury  
District                     :      London District 12

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Show Report

I am grateful to David Smith for inviting me to report on Banbury Cross Players' production of "Jack Absolute Flies Again". Simon Hook greeted me in the foyer and provided me with a copy of the interesting and informative programme, and also introduced me to director Phil Wintle who was generous with his time both before the show and during the interval.

"Jack Absolute Flies Again" is a recent reworking of Sheridan's "The Rivals", and while it draws substantially on this work and its dramatis personae, the web of influences extends much further. The scheming, message-carrying maid is straight out of a Shakespearean comedy; the network of romantic relationships, real or mistaken, could form the basis of a Whitehall farce; and the Battle of Britain setting evokes "Blackadder IV" in that elements of tragedy and comedy are brought together in an intimate setting in the midst of a global conflict. There's a lot going on, and the play could easily become eleven characters in search of an identity, but Phil's great achievement was to blend the rich assortment of ingredients into a satisfying production. There was wordplay and romance, pathos and farce, love, death and bunting everywhere ...the running time may have been over three

hours including the interval but the production was so pacy and engaging that the time simply flew by.

It helped that Phil had such a strong ensemble to work with. Steve Ramsden played our eponymous hero with his usual energy and flair. Jack Absolute is a heroic character, and Steve had him striding into the mess with his chin held high – respected by the officers, worshipped by the ground crew and adored by every woman on the airfield. Well, almost. But there was nothing remote or distant about this characterisation: not only is Steve very comfortable stepping through the fourth wall to address the audience directly, he is also capable of taking us with him as he hides behind the clematis-covered trellis in his farcical efforts to win the heart and hand of Lydia Languish. He makes Jack so personable and charming that you can't help but will him on.

But Steve's performance wasn't all false moustaches and stolen kisses in the alcove. When Jack takes to the air we see the seriousness of his work, the responsibility he bears and the fear he feels. The airfield antics are revealed for what they are – a distraction from the terrors of the dogfight, a public persona to disguise the private one. The contrast between Jack's professionalism and bravery in the cockpit and his puppyish playfulness on the ground was quite powerful and affecting, and Steve ensured that the pace of his scenes remained high thanks to secure knowledge of his lines and cues.

Lauren Davidson played Jack's paramour, Lydia Languish. You'd think that the two of them would make an ideal couple – dashing fighter pilot and pioneering aviator – but there's a problem. Lydia has read a book. Perfectly good ideas around socialism and feminism have somehow reacted together to lead Lydia to believe that she will only find love in

the arms of a proper working-class bloke. There are evidently only a few of these on the airfield, and Jack isn't one of them. Lauren's portrayal cleverly combined all the conflicting characteristics within Lydia; she's a proud, independent and self-reliant woman, but she wants to be swept off her feet by the fitter; she's in love with Jack, but is ruthlessly suppressing the thoughts and the emotions; she's an ambitious woman, but one who doesn't truly understand what she wants. Like Steve, Lauren is an engaging actor and there was palpable energy between the two of them; the scene in which they rattled through some quickfire dialogue while simultaneously executing a competition standard dance routine was particularly impressive, as were Lydia's earlier exchanges with the maid Lucy.

Jack is, at least potentially, a man of means thanks to him being the son and heir of Sir Anthony Absolute, a senior army officer. Adrian McGlynn didn't so much portray the brown job as inhabit the character, right down to the straight-backed stance with the chin slightly raised – presumably so Sir Anthony could look down his nose at everyone else. There was tremendous tonal and dynamic variation in Adrian's performance as he successfully navigated the thin line between eccentricity and ridiculousness; he seemed to get ever redder in the face as he raised his voice to all and sundry ("Be quiet, I'm shouting!"), the effort leaving him breathless and exhausted. The bluff and bluster were perfectly pitched, the arguments simultaneously impeccable and nonsensical, the opinions only too plausible. The energy of Adrian's performance was a further reason why the play was so pacy and engaging, and it all seeped away when Jack was shot down. The change in tone is sudden, almost manipulative, but Sir Anthony's sorrow and sense of loss came across very strongly as Adrian flipped his characterisation over from

shouting to listening, from pomposity to humility, from invulnerability to sensitivity.

Lydia is also well set up as she is related to Mrs Malaprop, whose splendid house has been requisitioned by the RAF. Mrs Malaprop's characteristic abuse of the English language to comic effect has resulted in her being immortalised in the dictionary, and here the play's authors have taken the opportunity to include every malapropism they could think of amongst her lines. It is to Hilary Beaton's great credit that she delivered all her flawed vocabulary and twisted syntax with tremendous precision and wonderfully natural rhythm, but the relentlessness of it all may have dulled the comic effect. That's not to say that there weren't some standout lines – this was the second show this year in which I have been overcome by emulsion – and Hilary extracted all the humour she could find thanks to cultured enunciation, a magnificently straight face, an earnest demeanour and enviable stage presence. She was also brave enough to attempt to do the splits!

The knowledge that a sudden violent death might be only a take-off away gave an immediacy to all the pilots' romantic pursuits. Robert Hoare portrayed Roy Faulkland as touchingly innocent and naïve: his pursuit of Julia Melville bore the hallmarks of a school crush rather than the relationship between a pilot and a soldier. His affectation of sucking on his pipe when reflecting on having "done it" in the local pub was amusing, but the subtext that wars are fought by young men and women under orders wasn't lost. It also fell to Robert to carry the physical and mental scars of conflict; he reacted to one particularly terrifying and deadly dogfight with an impassioned outburst which gave everyone pause for thought.

Julia herself, played by Ashden Woodrow, was the pleasingly pragmatic foil to Lydia Languish's idealism. While Lydia dreamt of her perfect man and his attributes, Julia recognised that life isn't perfect (especially in war time) and just got on with celebrating her love for Roy. Ashden is a particularly good participant in dialogue, giving her full attention to whoever is speaking, deflecting the audience's attention to where it needs to be, and giving every indication that she is listening carefully to what is being said. She also delivers her lines in a very measured way which made her characterisation of Julia notably persuasive and down-to-earth.

One of the many strengths of the play is that it recognises the important role played by Commonwealth pilots in the Battle of Britain. Bob Acres, played by Richard Oliver, has somehow made his way to East Sussex from the Australian outback, and the writing leaves us in no doubt about Bob's origins. Richard reinforced this with a persuasive and consistent Australian accent, and there was a pleasing naivety about the characterisation as if Bob had never been in a situation quite like this before, which presumably he hadn't. Richard was particularly good at projecting Bob's sense of wonderment when he made sense of something, as he looked the audience right in the eye with a big grin of amazement and surprise spreading across his face. The sense of an innocent abroad was also evident in Bob's reactions to women, an alien species he appeared to have little understanding of beyond a predictable schoolboy humour, and Richard was appropriately unapologetic when portraying Bob's inappropriateness.

Fellow pilot Bikram Khattri, played by Prash Raval, was almost as clueless as he confused love and romance, and he became quite animated and passionate when seeking to impress women with other people's poetry. It was touching but (from Bikram's perspective) ineffective, and Prash certainly threw himself wholeheartedly into portraying Bikram's flamboyant

style and optimistic attitude. In different ways Richard and Prash allowed their characters' innocence and inexperience to shine through, in sharp contrast with the brutal, violent war they were having to prosecute.

The flight was supervised by Brian Coventry, played by Bruce Walton, who found an appropriate balance between an almost paternal concern for his young charges and a proper regard for service discipline. The undercurrents around the character's sexuality seemed to be treated as nothing more than a humorous diversion, which might well be an accurate reflection of the attitudes of the time; in any event, if the play had sought to properly explore every serious theme which was exposed during the drama I'd probably still be there now. The RAF detachment was completed by Frederica Bowkett-Slater as Kingsmith and Pete Bailey as Sampson, who helped to provide quite a lot of atmosphere and context with their clipped accents, slightly knowing military drill and piloting of model planes to simulate dogfights. They also appeared as Polish aircrew, further reinforcing the point that the Battle of Britain was fought by pilots from many nations.

So far, so Boys' Own adventure – tally-ho, chocks away and all that. Slaving away in the hangar and miraculously keeping the kites in the air is Dudley Scunthorpe, played by James Smith, the token working class bloke on the airfield. Lydia swoons over his authenticity, although she might also be impressed by the size of his spanner. Jack nurtures a sort of theatrical camaraderie with him, all arm grasping and back slapping, as he at least realises that he needs Dudley's engineering skills, while Dudley is initially just pleased to be noticed. What Jack doesn't need is Dudley's apparent sexual magnetism, a characteristic James was able to conjure up through a combination of Sean Bean's accent and Mellors' brooding charisma. And what Jack doesn't realise is that

Dudley isn't actually his rival at all, as Lydia is not in fact the girl for him. Dudley is quite a challenging role to play as he rarely drives the narrative, yet finds himself in a variety of situations which demand distinct but coherent responses. In James's hands, whatever Dudley lacked in speed of thought he made up for in integrity, and his education in the university of life resulted in him being far more worldly than Bob or Bikram. He also handled the short section of audience participation with warmth and good humour.

Dudley is in fact sweet on Lucy, Mrs Malaprop's maid played by Immy Tredwell. Despite, or perhaps because of her social standing, Lucy is the most spirited character in the play, dispensing advice, delivering missives and generally interfering in things for her own amusement. Immy has terrific stage presence and the confidence to exploit it, as she strode purposefully centre stage and looked the audience right in the eye. She affected a consistent accent which unerringly identified her social class if not always which part of the country she came from, and conversed with everyone as if she was in charge, which in a very real sense she was – especially when delivering some meta commentary on the action. There was a certain swagger about Immy's movements which was entirely in keeping with her character, and she proved adept at striking a pose while waiting for some poor unfortunate to come round to her way of thinking.

The ensemble work was very strong; everybody knew their lines really well, cues were hit smartly, and if the audience was sometimes left behind trying to process the malapropisms this did at least mean that the pace remained entertainingly high throughout. And the cast did pause for breath now and then, particularly when the farcical humour gave way to moments of reflection on the brutality of war. The adult themes and language in the script were delivered without hesitation or

apparent embarrassment, and the occasional asides to the audience were differentiated from the onstage action without melodrama. Body language was also very good; there were few if any instances of excessive gesturing, the scale of the acting was in keeping with the venue, and sight lines were invariably respected. The staging of the occasional moment of intimacy, generally a horizontal snog, was appropriately tongue in cheek, if that's the phrase I'm looking for; enthusiastic enough to be meaningful, but exaggerated enough to be mildly farcical. Above all there was a real impression of community within the company, a sense of a disparate group of people forced together in dangerous days; I suspect that some of director Phil Wintle's rehearsal drills, such as run-throughs at pace or with exaggerated emphasis, may have contributed to this sense of ensemble.

The staging was imaginative and inventive, with traditional flats and elaborately constructed rooms eschewed in favour of some flexible furniture and isolated features. The wooden door on its small truck formed the basis of some knockabout humour, and the physical comedy appeared to have been meticulously rehearsed. Blackboards took the place of walls while doubling up as the medium for information such as the location of a scene, and items of furniture such as the mess table and dormitory beds were shifted around to suit a variety of settings. Critically, all the pieces had been fitted with castors so everything could be rearranged with minimal effort, and the cast frequently supported Stage Manager Lucy Byford and Assistant Stage Manager Janice Lake with the scene changes so the momentum of the play wasn't lost. I was particularly impressed by the way in which most of the pieces could be combined to form a serviceable model of Jack's Mark 2, with the beds doubling up as the wings, and a free-standing fan serving as the propellor.

The back wall of the theatre acted as a cyclorama, and Jack's beds-and-blackboard fighter soared persuasively through a projected cloudscape. The impression was heightened by clever lighting which was picked out by the smoke which filled the stage, and by an almost overwhelming sound plot, full of the deafening sound of powerful engines and weapons fire, which hinted at the fear and confusion that the pilots must have experienced. Projections, pieced together by the director, were also utilised in the scenes on the ground, with black and white archive footage interspersed with modern colour imagery. There was no conflict between the two, partly because the light intensity from the projector onto the back wall wasn't great which tended to wash out any colour, but mainly because the actors ensured that everyone's attention was firmly on them rather than on anything that might be projected behind them.

The inventiveness of the staging extended to the properties (by Terry Andrews, Simon Hook and Pete Bailey), with that "Let's do the show right here!" feeling of spontaneity reflected in items such as the letter (a piece of paper boldly marked "Letter"), the money ("Money") and the newspaper ("Newspaper"). I liked the way in which the antique telephone was held up by a member of the cast who simultaneously rang a handbell. It was of course a shame that the hot tea in the opening scene was non-existent, but at least the actors made a good show of pretending both that it was real, and that it really was very hot. There was no "Bull's Blood" either, but there was something in the bottle of emergency alcohol concealed in a persuasively period large metal teapot, and the Polish pilots appeared to have real food in their wicker picnic basket. Great duck, by the way.

The costumes, by Liz Riley, were in keeping with the very precise historical context, and if Mrs Malaprop's dress had

echoes of the 1920s, she is surely the sort of character who would want to extract full value from her wardrobe of clothes. The pilot officers stuck mainly to their blue serge uniforms, although Jack at least pulled on a flying jacket for his sorties. The army uniforms were particularly good, in terms of both their styling (Julia's skirt) and detailing (Sir Anthony's medal ribbons). The impression made by the costumes was enhanced by some excellent hair (Kim Freeman and Sophie Wittern-Locke) and make-up (Kate Groves): I particularly liked Lydia and Julia's hairstyles – severely constrained in a military manner, while hinting at the possibility of luxurious tresses – combined with an unapologetic splash of bright red lipstick. Roy's head injury looked disturbingly real, and helped to underpin his mental deterioration.

I'm fond of remarking that a play defies categorisation: is it a drama or a farce, a send-up of a classic piece of literature or a light-hearted study of much-eulogised period of history? Phil Wintle's expert direction meant that this production of "Jack Absolute Flies Again" was all of these things and great deal besides; as the old cliché goes, the whole was much more than the sum of its parts. How do you describe a piece in which a humorous line such as "I'm not old. I've just been here longer." Is followed in short order by the poignant observation that "if I started crying, I would never stop"? This was a great show – but then, I'm sure I heard recently that flatulence will get you everywhere ...

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