

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	A Handbag
Date	:	17 th September 2006
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

I am grateful to Adrian McGlynn for inviting me to report on the Banbury Cross Players' Season Preview, and particularly the accompanying short play, "A Handbag" by Anthony Horowitz. To be fair, BCP had invited the whole town along for taste of the coming year's programme, with free admission and a complimentary drink at the bar as additional inducements. The Players' ambition and enterprise was rewarded with a full house, and if there is any justice then the short extracts presented, together with the introductions from the director of each show, will encourage most of these theatre-goers back to The Mill to see the fully-staged productions in due course.

The extracts were necessarily works in progress, but if anyone needed to be convinced about the talent amongst the Players or the quality of their work then "A Handbag" provided ample evidence of both. This staging of Horowitz's short play had played with great success both locally and nationally, winning Best Supporting Actor and Best Director at the National Drama Festival during the summer. Here at last was an opportunity for Banbury residents to see the play for themselves: would it live up to the hype?

Well, yes. It's impossible to say whether or not this production was a worthy prize-winner without having seen any of the competition, but it was incontrovertibly an impressive showcase for the company as it played to their strengths. BCP stages most of its shows at The Mill, a relatively modern, black-box performance space, so the company tends not to rely

on the visual impact of ornate sets and carefully curated properties. “A Handbag” opened with six stacking chairs on the stage: it could have been anywhere, an impression reinforced by the neutral colour palette of the casual costumes. It’s quickly apparent that the cast of six is rehearsing “The Importance of being Earnest”, but the ensemble is anything but your average amateur theatre company. This is a group of prisoners, damaged individuals trying to outrun their pasts and survive in a violent, claustrophobic world, for whom this comedy of manners represents an escapist fantasy. What the Players do so well is gradually to peel away the artifice as the prisoners interact, so that their true characters are exposed under the intense pressure exerted by this dehumanising environment.

At first it is possible to believe that George, played by Adrian McGlynn, is a reasonably normally adjusted human being, insofar as the Director of any amateur production can be described as such. He is arranging the chairs for the rehearsal, and it’s soon apparent that he loves this play and really wants to put it on. So why is he here amongst these maladjusted miscreants? It takes a while for George’s backstory to emerge, and in the meantime his energy and enthusiasm are the only things sustaining his theatrical dream. Adrian was wonderfully expressive as he explained the play to his fellow actors, and encouraged and cajoled them into embracing their characters; his exasperation at their inability or unwillingness to conform was matched only by his incredulity at their lack of knowledge and understanding. He delivered his lines with clarity and passion as he did his utmost to bend the other players to his will. A conversation with Kinsey eventually forces George to confront his past, and Adrian ensured that much of the positivity ebbed out of his portrayal of George at this point; I particularly liked the way in which he twisted the hem of his T-shirt as he faced up to some agonising memories of where everything in his life had started to go wrong.

Rose, played by Deborah Galea, is a particular source of frustration for George; she is playing Lady Bracknell, and she hasn’t the first idea about the character, or any awareness of the theatricality associated with her

most famous line. Indeed, the reference to a handbag provokes concern in Rose's mind: after all, a handbag is often a very modest affair and she is appalled by the thought that someone might attempt to put a baby in one. Deborah was able to bring out the innocence within Rose's character through the guileless way in which she asked questions and made irrelevant observations; there's a strong suspicion that it's her naivety that has landed her in trouble, especially when she asks Allan what London is like. Rose's nervousness and anxiety was evident in Deborah's body language – she tended to tense up and sit with her knees clamped together and her shoulders up – and it was quite touching when a mention of cucumber sandwiches reminded her of childhood picnics and happier times.

Irene, played by Hilary Beaton, could hardly have been more unlike Rose. Her early exclamation that “anger management pisses me off!” was essentially a succinct summary of her character, and Hilary kept Irene's temper simmering throughout, occasionally boiling over in bouts of disruptive behaviour, naked aggression and barely controlled violent outbursts. Hilary delivered her lines in a consistent and persuasive scouse accent which somehow (and no doubt unfairly) sharpened her threatening personality. Irene really doesn't want to be in the play, and her suppressed anger was evident in her body language which was generally more dramatic than anything Irene contributed to the play.

Simon Hook gave a powerful performance as Specs; it's unclear whether he was born with his challenging combination of pronounced stammer, nervous tics and inability to relate to other people, or if it has been beaten into him. Either way, any hint of violence would see Specs curled up defensively as if expecting the worst – probably a common enough outcome. Simon's characterisation was spot on – persuasive, sustained, and capable of provoking sympathy in the audience – and the way in which Specs would recoil from even the most well-meaning intervention was particularly affecting. When prompted, Specs would read out loud in a flat monotone without any evident emphasis or understanding, but when asked to act out a scene he does so with incredible skill, swapping

characters in an instant – a theatrical tour de force which prompted a round of applause. Needless to say, Specs curled up once again the moment he had finished. Simon's portrayal of this complex character was nuanced and perfectly judged, so that Specs was never in danger of becoming merely a pathetic stereotype or a figure of fun.

Allan, played by Martin Crook, is the catalyst for a lot of what happens in the play. He's a volatile bundle of nervous energy, living life on a hair trigger and prepared to front up to anyone he disagrees with; Martin projected this through his constant, often involuntary movement, and particularly through the way in which he endlessly shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He's dissatisfied, critical and perpetually threatening in his manner; he's especially prejudiced against homosexuality, and believes that the streets of London are crowded with creeps and weirdos. While time spent around Victoria Station provides a tenuous link to the play he's rehearsing, Allan isn't an obvious candidate to play Algernon Moncrieff. Martin maintained his character's air of menace through his unsettled and unsettling body language, and through his challenging dialogue which was delivered in a strong Welsh accent. He's a troubled soul, but Allan is sufficiently self-aware to be able to trace the root causes of his current predicament back to his childhood: an addiction to video nasties led to him being beaten up and hospitalised by his step-dad, which in turn led to Allan running away from home. We are left to draw our own conclusions that Allan's prejudices and character were the result of bitter personal experience; the path to incarceration stretched back a long way, and was not the path that Allan would have chosen for himself.

Kinsey, played by Jonathan Muir, is a bit of an alpha male: he perches intimidatingly on the back of his chair, radiating the dangerous energy of a violent man with nothing to lose. Jonathan was able to characterise Kinsey as an unusually self-assured member of the group, confident in his ability ultimately to get his own way by any means necessary. He's been cast as the butler, Lane, but Kinsey is well-placed to persuade George that he should assume a more prominent role as George and Kinsey grew up together. His recollections of bicycle rides to Worthing – another

tenuous link to the play – and early forays into criminality have a profound effect on George, and Jonathan was able to relate these stories with such pathos that you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium

The Players had performed this piece many times in drama festivals across the country, and this experience showed. The cast inhabited their characters with total conviction; they knew their words and cues back to front, spoke over each other as necessary with confidence, and managed the ebb and flow of the dialogue exceptionally well. They actively listened to each other, with character maintained throughout. There was a pervasive feeling of nervous energy, of simmering anger tinged with melancholic regret: these characters had evidently made some terrible mistakes, but there was a lingering sense of potential unfulfilled, of the ordinary, decent young people they once had been before everything started to go wrong. The last few pages of their copy of “The Importance of Being Earnest” are missing: is this an indication that these young people’s futures have yet to be determined? Is there hope of salvation?

The production design was appropriate for a touring show, and reflected the ambiguity inherent in the play’s opening: the plastic chairs could have been in any institution, while the grey marl T-shirts and tracksuit bottoms merely suggested a secure institution. Lucy Byford’s sound and lighting design incorporated a loud klaxon which served as an alarm, and was accompanied by a bank of floodlights powering up to illuminate the audience in a way which suggested a breach of security. The properties by Terry Andrews included a selection of hats to indicate roles in “The Importance of Being Earnest”, and wristbands which illuminated when the alarm sounded, a further and highly effective dehumanising touch.

Director Chrissie Garrett ensured that the intensity of the piece was maintained throughout, but also drew out some of its comedic moments; the audience certainly appreciated George’s summary of the theatre-going habits of the middle classes. But such lighter elements weren’t allowed to overwhelm the play’s more serious themes around the factors which shape our lives and the possibility of redemption when things go wrong.

This was a powerful and thought-provoking production which featured some terrific performances, and while there was no mystery about why it had done so well at Drama Festivals the audience still had plenty to ponder as they left the theatre.

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