

Banbury Cross Players **A Handbag by Anthony Horowitz**

By Karen Carney of Oxfordshire Drama Network

Banbury Cross Players' annual Preview Night offers audiences a tantalising glimpse of the season ahead, with directors introducing their forthcoming productions and casts presenting short rehearsed readings in the hope of whetting appetites – and, of course, encouraging a few early ticket sales.

This year, however, there was an additional attraction after the interval, with a further opportunity to see the company's highly successful festival production of Anthony Horowitz's *A Handbag*. It has been quite a year for this little play. Beginning its festival journey at the ODN Festival, where it won the Audience Award and earned a recommendation to the National Drama Festival, the production went on to finish runner-up at Lighthorne before enjoying considerable success at the Corn Exchange Festival in Wallingford, including the award for Best Play. Its journey culminated at the National Drama Festival, where, competing against companies from across the UK and overseas, it achieved third place overall as well as awards for Best Director and Best Supporting Player. Having also seen the production at the National Festival, I was particularly interested to see it again, this time back on home ground and in the rather different surroundings of the Mill Arts Centre.

Written by Anthony Horowitz for the National Theatre's New Connections programme, *A Handbag* is a short, six-character play that initially appears to offer the familiar territory of a group rehearsing Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Very quickly, however, it becomes apparent that neither the actors nor their surroundings are quite what we might expect. As the rehearsal progresses and the characters struggle with Wilde's language and a world far removed from their own, fragments of their individual stories begin to emerge, gradually revealing why they are together

and lending a much darker significance to the comedy they are attempting to perform. It is this gradual shift in our understanding that makes *A Handbag* deceptively challenging to stage: the Wilde rehearsal needs to be genuinely funny while planting just enough clues for us to sense that something more troubling lies beneath the surface.

Director Chrissie Garrett handled this beautifully. The presentation was deceptively simple: an empty playing space with six basic chairs arranged in a semi-circle, providing both a rehearsal area and room for the characters to interact, squabble and air their grievances. Costumes were equally understated – sweatpants, T-shirts and sliders, with fluorescent wristbands and just the occasional suggestion of costume for the Wilde scenes, such as bowler hats for Jack and Algernon. Bright, even institutional lighting completed the initially anonymous environment, while The Who's *Behind Blue Eyes* proved a particularly poignant musical choice as the significance of the characters' situation became apparent.

We first met George (Adrian McGlynn) and Rose (Deborah Galea) rehearsing the famous 'handbag' scene, George throwing himself enthusiastically into Jack Worthing with suitably clipped tones while Rose did her somewhat less accomplished best as a spectacularly miscast Lady Bracknell. McGlynn made George pompous, condescending and frequently exasperated – the self-appointed man with the theatrical vision, desperately trying to chivvy his reluctant company towards it. Yet there was real poignancy beneath the bluster. His description of his perfect evening of theatre, dinner and wine conveyed a genuine yearning for another life. Even better was the contrast when Kinsey appeared and the bossy director suddenly diminished before our eyes, the nervous wringing of his T-shirt revealing just how intimidated George remained by someone with whom he shared a troubled history.

Galea's Rose was wonderfully naïve and easily shocked, inhabiting a fantasy world all of her own. Her horrified indignation at the very

idea of a baby being abandoned in a handbag was beautifully delivered and extremely funny, but there was something distinctly unsettling beneath the comedy as we gradually learned more about this apparently simple woman and the crime that had brought her here.

Simon Hook gave a terrific physical performance as Specs. Despite being the tallest member of the company, he somehow made the meek and nervous Specs appear very small indeed. His stutter was convincing and consistent and his xylophone playing provided some lovely comedy, but the highlight came when he confidently launched into his own summary of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, suddenly stutter-free and enthusiastically playing every character.

Martin Crook's Allan was altogether edgier: feisty, argumentative and apparently permanently wired, with a short fuse and plenty of nervous energy. Small details gave us glimpses of what lay beneath the bravado. When Allan finally spoke of the abuse he had suffered at the hands of his stepfather, followed by further abuse on the streets of London, Crook handled the change of tone with great sensitivity. It was an affecting performance full of energy and pathos and one that demonstrated exactly why he received the Best Supporting Player award at the National Drama Festival.

Just before the arrival of Irene and Kinsey came one of the production's most effective reveals. A piercing siren brought the actors obediently to attention; the chairs were turned and, for the first time, the letters 'HMP' became visible on their backs. Suddenly everything we had already seen acquired a different meaning. The pause as the prisoners stood silently to attention was particularly effective, before Irene and Kinsey's arrival shattered the stillness and plunged the stage back into chaos. From this point onwards there was a palpable sense that these characters were constantly under surveillance.

Hilary Beaton attacked Irene with tremendous energy: loud, brash, provocative, argumentative and apparently hard as nails, with a consistently maintained Liverpudlian accent. Yet her aggression was clearly defensive, suggesting someone who had learned that attack was the safest form of self-protection.

Jonathan Muir's Kinsey provided an excellent contrast. Quiet and controlled where others were volatile, his stillness made him considerably more threatening. A small, tic-like sniff added to the sense of unease, while his enjoyment of exerting control over George established their power dynamic immediately. There was, however, a lovely moment when George called him 'Colin'. For an instant the intimidating Kinsey disappeared and we glimpsed the childhood friend beneath, suggesting that despite everything that had happened to them, some vestige of their old bond remained.

This was very much an ensemble piece and Garrett ensured there was always life on stage, even when characters were not directly involved in the action: Kinsey perched on the back of his chair with his feet on the seat, physically asserting his status, while Allan variously slouched with apparent indifference or sat charged with nervous tension. Movement around the sparse playing space felt natural and the pace flowed effortlessly, while the balance between comedy and pathos was beautifully maintained.

At the heart of the play is George's attempt to persuade this disparate group why performing *The Importance of Being Earnest* matters. For a short time they can cease to be people defined by their crimes, histories and institutional surroundings and step onto a stage to become somebody else. It is a simple idea, but in this context an unexpectedly moving one.

The final image brought everything neatly full circle. The siren sounded once more; the prisoners returned obediently to attention beside their chairs and, as the lights faded, their fluorescent wristbands began to flash before *Behind Blue Eyes* returned.

Technically the production was unfussy and extremely well executed – lighting and sound cues were precise and there was nothing superfluous. It needed nothing more.

As a director myself, I often find myself watching a production and wondering what choices I might have made differently. Here, I genuinely struggled to find one. Having now seen this production twice, I can readily understand why *A Handbag* has enjoyed such a successful festival journey. A deceptively simple production, sensitively directed and beautifully played – well done, Banbury Cross Players.