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Society : Shinfield Players Theatre
Production : Last Tango in Whitby
Date : 02/03/2023
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

Show Report

Thank you for the invitation to join you for your production of “Last Tango in Whitby”. After delays due to the pandemic and Storm Eunice and changes of cast as a result, it must have been such a relief to finally be able to bring this production to the stage!

Written by the Mike Harding, the play is set in the late 60’s/early 70’s and follows a group of pensioners as they embark on their annual 'cheapie all-in out of season' holiday at a hotel in Whitby. The different personalities of the group were established as soon as the cast entered the stage to board the charabanc, with some earthy humour and banter as they journeyed to Whitby. It was very clear that this group of actors had gelled well and were very believable as the group of old friends going on holiday together. All the cast had developed their northern accents which they maintained in the most part throughout and they certainly looked the part.

Cast

Gordon Bird (Jimmy) was the life and soul of the party of pensioners. He was every bit the joker, always in character with his double entendres and innuendos. Gordon had good delivery of his lines and brought a lot of fun to the character. He was well supported by **Debbie Gray** (Joan) playing his wife and together they made a believable couple, happily wed and enjoying a bit of fun. Debbie was warm and kind, but she gave as good as she got in their frequent sexually teasing exchanges. These two were clearly comfortable working together which came over in their performance.

Brian Nixey (Henry) was the interfering backseat driver who sat at the front of the coach, distracting the driver with his jokes and the mistaken idea that he had better knowledge of the route to Whitby.

He had clearly developed his character as a talkative joker who rather fancied himself as a ladies' man, but projecting more and turning a little towards the audience when speaking would have meant that fewer of his lines were lost. His turn in the talent contest playing the spoons to a temperamental wind-up (and winding-down) gramophone was excellent and his near exhaustion at the end of his performance was hilarious and very well done.

Jane Minchin, Linda Bostock and Karen Bird together brought us a lovely trio of ladies who stuck together gossiping with some very comical lines as they observed and judged the behaviour of their fellow holiday makers. **Jane Minchin** (Kathleen) was perfectly cast as the domineering, judgmental, leader of the little threesome. Her accent and the clarity of her lines was excellent but on occasions she did look to be delivering her lines rather too much out to the audience and turning a little to the group she was sat with would have looked more natural, but her character was strong throughout. **Linda Bostock** (Maureen) brought a quiet contrast to the domineering Kathleen, whilst bringing out her out character's disgust at 'kissing couples', and her severe disapproval of Pat's behaviour and Henry's carrying on. At times, she was a little quiet, but her character was spot on. **Karen Bird** (Jessie) was suitably gauche and endearing, and her tendency to repeat the end of everyone else's sentences gave the audience great amusement. Her characterisation was perfect; childlike; innocent of French letters and the like, but with a brilliant contrast at the end when she turned on Kathleen saying - she could stick her friendship "up your bum" and that she had been waiting to say that for 25 years. Karen's solo in the talent contest was absolutely in character, charming and sweet and she hit the top notes beautifully.

Sandra Miall (Pat) For Pat, recently widowed, this year's trip is tinged with sadness, but she is determined to put on a brave face and enjoy herself. Sandra in her characterisation initially displayed a convincing sense of loss and loneliness but then quickly showed a determination to buck up as "her Arthur" would have said and to get on with life and not to mope. Her central role in the play was very believable as she was torn between her loyalty to her deceased husband and her feelings for Phil. She exploited the mischievous side of Pat's nature: while her later assertiveness and joy were acted full of conviction. Her lines were clear and her interaction with the other cast members excellent.

Yvonne Mitchell (Alice/Sally) **Sherrie Carslake** (Edie/Tea Girl) worked well together as the twins; dressed identically and inseparable. Their performances were light-hearted and fun with lovely, synchronised movement. **Sherrie** sang “Puppet on a string” with good expression, but taking the mic with her when she went to interact with Yvonne would have improved her performance as her volume was lost when she moved away from the mic stand. **Yvonne** contrasted her buoyant characterisation of Alice very well with the much more serious Sally (Pat’s daughter). She clearly showed her concern that her mum was making a mistake going off with Phil but only out of love.

Simon Trinder (Driver/Jet Shop Man/Gino/John/courting couple) Simon was very busy with his many different parts. As the much-put-upon driver who had heard it all before, Simon was suitably miserable as he sat trapped at the wheel of the charabanc subjected to Henry’s backseat driving. He managed the hotel bar efficiently and made a lovely ‘teenager’ courting with his girlfriend on the park bench. His dialogue was a little quiet at times, but he gave contrast in his characterisations.

Jeff Gilbert (Phil) and **Lucy Bolton** (Edna) played husband and wife hotel entertainers “The Shangri-La’s’ It was clear from the outset that Phil’s relationship with his wife of many years was on the rocks and **Jeff** showed this well. With Pat, he was kind and caring which he contrasted well with a more angry and frustrated side when interacting with his wife. His performance as the hotel entertainer was altogether more light-hearted, but at times, he seemed a little unsure. Developing this part of his character to be bigger and more comedic would have brought more depth to his performance. This was Jeff’s first time on the Shinfield stage, and he interacted really well with the other cast members and gave a good performance. **Lucy** as Edna certainly showed her feelings with a multitude of disapproving expressions. She played Edna with a quiet dignity and poignancy but with a fierce edge to her characterisation. As she stood to the side of the proceeding watching her husband flirting with Pat, you could certainly feel the tension. Her line delivery was a little quiet at times, particularly when she was at the back of the stage, but she delivered her lines with a tense edge to her speech which made the difficult situation she found herself in very believable.

Nadine Masseron (Clare) and **Clare Kendall** (Debbie) the two hotel waitresses added some sparkle to the play. **Nadine** the newer of the two was a brash gum chewing Liverpudlian who didn’t really seem

to like her job. She moved well on stage and maintained her character and accent throughout, although softening the accent a little and losing the gum in the second act and would have given some contrast to her characterisation. **Clare** was excellent and had a lovely comedic element to her character raising the energy on stage each time she entered. She had excellent facial expressions, body language and gestures and was able to communicate exactly what she thought even when she wasn't speaking. These two worked well together giving a good contrast to the elderly hotel guests.

Derek and Rachel Lockwood (Fred and Flo) were perfect as the sweet old couple having a lovely time away on holiday. They seemed completely oblivious to all the drama going on around them and were just in love, enjoying old time dancing and moonlit walks along the prom. **Rachel** also played one of the duo of tea girls, cheekily eavesdropping on conversations whilst dawdling over serving tea and cakes and was the voice of Restaurant manager Mrs Mingham conveying in her off stage voice annoying authority as she chastised her two waitresses.

Creatives

Carol Vockins (Director) assisted by **Graham Vockins** (Producer)

Well done Carol and Graham for sticking with the play despite the many obstacles and following that old adage "the show must go on" There were some delightful characters developed as we were transported to a fun filled seaside resort and Carol certainly ensured that her actors were a cohesive team. I was impressed that Mike Harding's humour came across to the audience and the cast are to be congratulated on their comic timing. At times, there was a little lack of pace in act one, but in act two there was much more energy and the cast bounced along as the play moved between humour, laughter and poignancy. The choice to use back projection for the various locations was effective and added interest to the scenes. There was a good choice of set pieces, but changing the position of some of them, for example the charabanc and the bar would have meant that the cast could be heard better and would have avoided some blocking. Overall, Carol had ensured that mixed in with all the comedy and laughter, those important lessons to be learnt about what is important in life came through clearly.

Tayler Rhodes (Dance Advisor) Dance and movement were integral to the play with the many short scenes being interspersed with different dance sequences. I am aware from chatting with the director that their choreographer had to drop out and Tayler joined the production team late on in the rehearsal process to help for which I am sure the team were very grateful. Understandably, the cast looked a little unsure of their dance moves at times, but the Gay Gordons dance sequence and the waltz in the second act worked well and the cast looked confident with them. Adding the synchronised movement of the cast as they came on and off stage was a nice touch and a distraction from the movement of set pieces.

Matthew Chishick (Stage Manager) assisted by a small stage crew and members of the cast managed the stage and set changes very well, ensuring that the large cast were able to make their many entrances and exits without obstruction. There were 16 set changes and a large number of set pieces and items of furniture to be moved on and off the stage, but they were all managed very well. Many of the set changes occurred with lights up and dressing the crew member who came on stage in relevant costumes (a dinner jacket and workman's overalls) helped to make the changes more effective. Credit must be given to him as he was always in character and looked very natural on stage.

Matthew Chishick (Lighting Design) **Graeme Rhodes** (Sound Design and Tech Operation) Sound and lighting were very well designed and played an important role in establishing the settings, from the hotel, the beach and pier. Graeme was kept very busy with the very many sound effects and musical cues which he ran alongside the lighting. All the lighting and sound effects were cued effectively, and the sound was well balanced. Fading the music when the cast froze during the dialogue worked well, meaning that the cast front of stage could be heard. A few of the musical cues though ended a little abruptly and would have sounded better with a fade. The lighting was designed and run very well to effectively depict day and night in both the indoor and outdoor settings. The stage was well lit and there was a good use of spots for the dialogue at the front of the dancers.

Graham Vockins (Set Design) assisted by **Di Capel, Natalie Clarke, Steve Toon, Graham Smith, Debbie Wheeler, Sam Turner, Carol Vockins** (Set Build) The use of back screen projection to depict the changing venues and scenes was enhanced by clever set pieces and props. The team had built a very impressive set piece which served as the hotel desk and cleverly transformed also into a jet shop and

a bar. The addition of optics to the back of the bar was impressive making the bar look very realistic. Its placement alongside the stage left wall meant that some of the audience did not have good sight of it which was a shame. The slot machines in the arcade were all very realistic and a great addition to that scene.

Carol Vockins (Wardrobe Mistress) The costumes had been well researched and were appropriate for the social class and the period. There was a lot of attention to detail and the cast all looked very comfortable and could move well in the costumes. The addition of headscarves and period glasses added to the authenticity of the play. The costumes for the talent show and the fancy dress costumes were excellent and really added to the fun. Alice and Edie's costumes for puppet on a string and Kathleen's Boadicea costume were great, and who could forget Jimmy in his harem girl's outfit?!!

Debbie Wheeler assisted by **Graham Smith** (Properties) There were a lot of props which had been sourced with good attention to detail and of the time. The wind-up gramophone was particularly fine! The set was very well dressed with appropriate props. I liked the flat suitcases which added a comic touch as the cast boarded the charabanc and the addition of the bowl of keys at the hotel desk to be handed out to the guests added to the realism. The bar was well stocked, and I was glad to see that the optics were full and the glasses when served had drink in them.

Pam Dennis (Hair and Make-up) There were a lot of excellent wigs and hairstyles which were of the period and really added to the authenticity of the play. Clare and Debbie's beehive wigs were particularly good, and Sally's brown bob very effectively differentiated her from Yvonne's other characters.

I was so pleased that you were finally able to perform this play and it was great to see the cast enjoying being together performing again. I look forward to joining you again soon.

Cate

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