

RN THEATRE FESTIVAL 2012
HMS SULTAN – WEDDING OF THE YEAR

Play. This is a slight piece by Norman Robbins. Both plotting and writing are a bit erratic and unfocussed, making the dialogue a bit clumsy and therefore difficult to learn and to put across with conviction – a real challenge for actors. Some characters are introduced and then left stranded with little or no dialogue e.g. Harry's first entry. The characterisations vary between the realistic (Alison) and downright music hall caricature (the Aunts). Difficult for a director to find a cohesive style to cover this spectrum! I think that the secret here is to play for maximum impact, that is, almost OTT and at a very fast pace. The story only has a single notion at its core, with little or no sub-plots worthy of the name, so we end up with a lot of repetitive dialogue on the recurring theme – lots of people sitting talking and not much opportunity for real action. What comic action there is we only hear about – the pub collapsing, the Chinese vase etc. All in all this play is a significant challenge for any company to really make something of it.

Direction. So, having said the above, Ralph Dinnick in his directorial debut made a pretty decent silk purse out of the sow's ear material he was dealing with. This was a competent and reasonably tight piece of directing which made the most of, or possibly exceeded, the author's intentions. Of course this is a team who have, in the main, played together for a number of years, understand each others strengths and weaknesses and have a good grasp of the nuances of playing comedy. But the director needs to impose his sense of style and order and this was done well here. There were good stage pictures and good use was made of the acting area. In the main, actors moved around the space easily and without masking each other. Perhaps a little more imaginative business for the actors during the longish duologues would have been good, rather than just sitting on the sofa or chairs. Ethel, for example could have expended some of her nervous energy by just doing things around the room – moving ornaments, general tidying up, etc. Pace generally was good throughout the piece but there were occasional lapses, especially towards the end – the beginning of Scene 4 which opened with yet another fairly static 2-hander (Cilla and Peggy). It is at this point that the actors needed to dig deep and find a fresh flush of energy and drive the dialogue (possibly even *fight* the dialogue) to keep the whole thing sparkling and interesting. Cue bite just occasionally was a little bit lax. As I said, if you can find the time, it's worth doing a "gabbling" rehearsal, where you forget acting, use the books if need be and just belt out the lines as quickly as possible. Pick difficult or problematic sections of the play and repeat this over and over. It helps both to cement the lines and to get the cue bite really tight. Make sure that actors really point the comedy lines. This is especially important where, as here, the comedy is broad and situation based, rather than intrinsically witty. Set-up and punch lines must always be articulated clearly and socked to the audience – challenge them *not* to laugh!

I think it would have been a good idea to have made a programme note that the play was set in the 1970s. If no mention of time is made, audiences will assume present day – and then several things in this piece just look dated or anachronistic. The alternative is to set in the present and just do the minor alterations to the dialogue and props (e.g.hearing aid) that this would require.

Overall, I think that this was a successful production, which transcended, in many ways the given material and for a first-time director was a significant achievement. Very well done indeed.

Stage and Technical. The set for the play was just right and not using the front curtain was a good idea – it can exclude the audience, particularly during scene changes. The design was good and I can understand how you had to compromise on the 1970s wallpaper (thank goodness – the decade that taste forgot!) It would have been an added touch if you could have got hold of some of the 1970s iconic art such as Tretchikoff's Chinese Girl or any similar garish pictures of the time. That

really would have set the period! But a small point, the set was good and the scene changes were very efficiently handled by Kathryn Harrison and her crew.

Given the limitation of the lighting rig (and you do have significant limitations) I thought that Steve Brown and Jason Testa displayed considerable imagination in the way they interpreted the plot.

The opening door effect, lightning and the car headlights were very well done. My only reservation was the rather too amber light coming in the window – more suggestive of sodium street lamps than mid-morning sun. The initial cross-fade between the set lights and the stage lighting was very good and had a good initial impact. In general terms, your stage is not (and never has been) bright enough. I think it would be worth investigating how you could move your whole rig further forward towards the stage. I think that the lanterns set on the 3rd bar back must have added very little to the total light of the stage. Even if you have to use patching leads from the third bar, I think it would be worth getting the majority of your lights on the first and when full, the second bars. I would not have thought that this would be an expensive exercise.

I think that a few more sound effects would have been good – door opening and closing, trousers being ripped, cars arriving etc.

Properties were fine and the paintbrush sticking to the chair was excellent – I didn't see how it was done!

Overall this was a good technical effort from the team and added greatly to the quality of the show. Very well done all.

Costumes and Make-up. A real challenge for Sue Williams to recreate the 70s in costume – the more recent the period the harder it is to nail. But there were good suggestions of that time, particularly Peggy's blue dress which was spot-on. As I mentioned, I think it was a pity that Harry could not have been a bit more flamboyantly in period but I appreciate the difficulties! I spoke about the wigs – again appreciating the crippling costs of hiring good theatrical wigs but I think that the choice for Cilla did not convey the desired impression of great age. The aunts wigs were fine as were their costumes, particularly the wedding outfits which were suitably outrageous as befitted these very strange characters! The seatless trousers visual gag worked very well indeed. Overall another well dressed show.

Makeup by Jennie Collins and Chris Page was generally OK but again, Cilla needed much more shading and highlight to bring out the folds of the skin which the aged inevitably have. Don't be tempted to depend on too fine lines – large but carefully blended blocks of colour are needed here. But nevertheless most of the character work was absolutely fine. Well done.

Acting.

Ethel. Janice Steedman gave a nicely rounded performance of the slightly stressed out Mother figure. In truth there wasn't much to go on from the text but a genuine warmth pervaded this characterisation and a believable rapport was established with other members of the family. Just remember the cardinal rule - don't give the audience too much profile, we need to see your face, full on, quite a lot! This is particularly true in the longish 2–people-sat-down conversations in this play. But a very pleasing performance - well done indeed.

Peggy. Sue Green's performance grew as the show progressed. At the start, I would like to have seen a bit more affected cut-glass in the voice and perhaps occasionally just getting the odd vowel sound slightly wrong. I think this would have helped to establish the hollowness of this character, alongside the downright nasty streak. But

this did come as the play progressed and we learned to really dislike this woman and her pathetic one-upmanship. So a good characterisation. Well done.

Walter. Occasionally this was a slightly hesitant performance from Martyn Webb and again, I would like to have seen a quicker establishment of the character before we came to the extraordinary and otherwise uncharacteristic outburst at Peggy over her husband's charges. The writing didn't help at all here and I sensed a bit of a struggle with the text (very understandable as I said before!). However we got the measure of this character and understood his eternal frustration with his accident prone son!. Well done.

Frank. This was not an easy part to get to grips with, I suspect. There were lots of rather lame jokes and an incessant taunting of Alison about her weight, which became slightly irritating in its repetition. However I thought that Randy Vince made a valiant attempt at breathing life into this part and actually found more comedy than I expected from the text and he gave him more humanity than Robbins deserved from his writing. Very well done.

Alison. Kat Salt looked exactly right for this part (I learned the reason later – congratulations), but as with many other aspects of the show, the writing fell short of providing a rounded psychology of this character. Any actress would struggle with finding the truth of Alison and I would guess that Kat got as close as one could. There are many inconsistencies in the writing, most obviously Alison's persistent references to her weight and unattractiveness, then telling Peggy that she'd had enough of it. The two positions could have been linked very well by showing the build of frustration and exposing how Alison really coped with her appearance. It was really important to get the audience on side and to really love Alison, but the author fell quite a way short of achieving this. So it says quite a lot for this actress that she got as much out of the part as she did. Just be careful to point all the humorous lines as carefully and clearly as possible. The pathos of the character needs to be pointed as well, as in "This is the best chance I've ever had" . That line needs to be delivered right to the audience for maximum effect. But a gallant shot at a difficult part. Very well done.

Melvyn. This part was much better written – probably because Melvyn is a slapstick character, which is much nearer to Robbins' forte. Needless to say Jim Wringe went for it in spades! I think this was a complete fulfillment of the author's intentions for this part – although I do think that Robbins started intending him to be a mad inventor but moved slightly in the development, to him being just an accident prone idiot. Nevertheless this was a very competent performance, which put extra impetus into the pace of the piece and raised a lot of laughs. Very well done.

Honorina & Matilda. I take these two as one (as did the author). Written purely as ciphers, these 1 dimensional characters belong in revue or music hall, not really in a play, which (presumably) intends to have some sort of serious narrative content. Nevertheless Jo Blossom and Jackie Jack rose to the challenge and gave us exactly what the author wanted (and then some!) Perched like two little birds on a wire, they interacted beautifully with each other and looked resplendent (if somewhat ludicrous – Robbins' fault) in their wedding outfits. Two endearing performances which once again, transcended the text. Very well done.

Harry. Colin Salt inhabited this character to perfection and could have been utterly hilarious had the part not been so profoundly underwritten. Nevertheless we were given a very funny

and well-concentrated portrait of the camp designer, who, inexplicably, falls for the girl. A fine piece of characterisation. Very well done.

Cilla. Sonja Maughan didn't seem quite old enough as Cilla. This was due to a combination of the wig and make-up and rather too agile body movement when seated (as opposed to the very stiff gait when walking). Nevertheless, a good clear voice and suitable accent gave this interpretation a certain charm and in the end we got the feel of the irascible old lady. Well done.

SUMMARY.

I apologize for going on about the quality of writing in this play but I do think that your talented company is worthy of better material than dear old Norman Robbins. Choice of play is such an important starting point for any successful production, which challenges the ability of the directing and acting team and requires some interpretation of the script. In other words a more textured and layered piece where you can explore the possibilities of the characterisations and situations. But having said that, given the material, you made a good show out of it and as a directing first for Ralph Dinnick, a great deal was achieved. The main thing to be observed about this show was the palpable ensemble playing – no-one was trying to upstage anyone else. Good teamwork is so important, is usually inspired by good leadership and was greatly in evidence here. Very well done to the entire team and thank you for allowing me to see it and for giving me a very enjoyable evening.

Doug.