

CTG Festival 2014/15

Kingsley Players

Time of My Life by Alan Ayckbourn - Wednesday 12th May 2015

The Play

Alan Ayckbourn's "Time of My Life" was first presented in 1992 and explores his social observations of a Northern family over two decades using plain speaking, blunt humour and the distinctive Yorkshire speech patterns with the universal exploration of human behaviours and foibles.

Although the setting for this play is simplistic it is the character information that Ayckbourn gives that demonstrates strongly that what is important is that this is a play, fundamentally about the relationships between the Stratton family.

Dependent upon which stage in life audience are at, there is something for everyone in this play: the exhausted parent, the frustrated wife or the young lover.

Setting

In a small community hall in the village of Kingsley a small space had been simplistically yet effectively transformed into a performing area. Using the theatre in the round format that suits most of Ayckbourn's work due to his writing specifically for the Stephen Joseph Theatre Scarborough and The New Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, three different sized tables positioned strategically denoting three different locations and three time frames. The tables were covered with cream table cloths, accompanied by green chairs that gave the appropriate restaurant feel.

The round table was dressed with a variety of party objects, wine glasses half empty and an array of plates and serviettes giving the impression that this was the end of an evening's celebrations.

The two, two-seater tables were suitably positioned using the remainder of the theatre space whilst leaving enough room for the actors to move and be seen.

This was a good example of less-is-more achieving an effective setting.

Lighting and Sound

There were three areas that denoted three different time frames and although no specials were required these areas did require a differing feeling of warmth. Each of these was suitably lit. There were occasions when some of the cues could have been a little quicker in the execution and this resulted in slowing down the pace slightly. There was a good use of fading the lights from one scene into another aiding in the ambience of the production.

The choice of music from the opening and closing of the play to the music in the restaurant was appropriate again adding to the atmosphere.

Props

In keeping with the properties list as stated in the script the props were appropriate and in keeping with the time frame. The “sweet trolley” looked particularly appetising and it was good to see that this was slightly varied each time it appeared.

Costume

As well as being appropriate to the early 1990’s the costumes also reflected the characters emotional states where necessary;

- Stephanie’s contrasting dowdy look in the oversized jumper and trainers in Act Two compared to her more officious attire helped to demonstrate clearly her shift in life choice and how this had impacted upon her.
- The ongoing metamorphosis of Maureen with differing coloured hair and slightly outlandish clothing helped to show her desperation to fit in to the family and be accepted.
- The purposefully bad wigs of the “Waiters” strongly denoted that all characters were being acted by one actor. This particularly worked well and was effective.

Acting

Gerry (Malcolm Barker)

Although this performance began with a little hesitancy on picking up on the cues, once into the stride of the production this characterisation offered believability and a certain air of sympathy to Gerry. The back story of this man being in business for most of his life and the trials and tribulations that brings with it was evident in the physical characterisation. The relationship with Laura was developed with sincerity and integrity and was one that most of the audience could relate to.

The vocal characterisation offered a warmth all of which resulted in a solid, believable performance.

Laura (Sue Elliott)

This was a balanced performance from an actress who was confident and assured in the physicality and vocal characterisation. The performance could have easily been one dimensional, but this was not so with a balanced and developed character displaying the frustrations of a mother and wife. Ayckbourn observes the female psyche through his blunt and razor-sharp dialogue and this was executed with razor-sharp timing resulting in a character that was believable and which resonated with the audience.

Glyn (Simon Sutton)

Contrasting against the un-assured brother Adam, Glyn is the go-getting male chauvinist and this was a characterisation that whilst being suitably underplayed offered all of those traits. The scene when he meets with Steph and he tells her that he is back with Sarah offered poignancy and humour whilst not detracting from the truth of the character. The reaction when she later asks him for a divorce maybe could have been a little bigger but this is a minute detail in what was otherwise a solid performance.

Adam (Jacob Powell)

The stereotypical mummy's boy had all of the ingredients of cuteness and frustration accompanied with the help of looking like a geek. The characterisation was played as a young man who is consistently awkward and is seeking approval from his mother.

The vocal delivery was good and there was a definitive physical difference displayed during the meetings with Maureen. The comedy was played well acted leaving the audience feeling empathy towards Adam.

Stephanie (Jo Oultram)

When there is no natural progression within a character's development, as is clearly the case with Stephanie, as the audience observe her in three time frames which are not concurrent, it can be forgiven if the characterisation is sometimes lost. I was delighted to observe that this was not apparent here as this was an intelligent performance from the actress who had clearly thought out the emotional mind-frame of this character delivering it with clarity and focus. The shift in Stephanie's emotional state from being down-trodden into an assertive professional woman was thought provoking.

Maureen (Ellie Hamer)

This performance offered pace and a good command of comic timing. Although prompted (and I didn't think that you needed to be, as I think it was a case of an over exuberant prompt) this did not faze you and your performance was not affected in any way. There were many examples of using your physicality to show how this young woman developed from being unsure into finding her voice.

This was a funny and moving performance.

Calvinu, Tuto, Aggi, Dinka, Bengie (Phil Murray)

To have the opportunity to play multi-characters is an actors' dream and this was not wasted in either the vocal or physical characterisations. Each was delivered with a razor-sharp aptitude that had all been carefully thought through. It was a privilege to watch a "sweet trolley" being taken onto a stage in so many differing ways whilst remaining believable. I did have to look at the programme several times to make sure that it was just one actor playing five roles!

Each of the characters was so different demonstrating the aged Calvinu to the cocky Dinka a sure sign of a competent actor!

This was a funny and engaging performance of skill!

Direction

Before this production began it was refreshing to enter an environment that was well supported and vibrant. The stage crew entered along with the audience dressed as waiters and waitresses setting the tables. This was effective as this is what would happen when attending a restaurant and this touch helped to set up the atmosphere immediately creating the ambience. As the play began the iconic theme from the film Dirty Dancing – “I’ve had the Time of My Life” was played. Again helping to set the scene and reflecting the play’s title. The cast entered in a blackout, sitting at the table simply chatting until the lights came up on that area. This was a good way to begin as it gave the impression that the audience were eavesdropping on a group of strangers. From the outset this play had a good pace whilst not compromising diction from the actors. All of the characters were quickly established and the relationships between them apparent and strong. The idea of one actor playing all the waiters and the restaurant owner appears confusing on the text but this was validated with ease helping to polarise much of the humour that is evident throughout this play.

A strong point of this production was how the actors played the realism. All of the reactions were believable and consistent and at no time forced or over played. When Laura says: “And thank you for the clock...” each reaction was different demonstrating what each was feeling.

The use of tableaux from the end of one scene into the next was valuable in determining the time shift helping the audience to understand what could have otherwise been a confusing concept.

There were several lighting cues that could have been delivered a little quicker in the first half of the play especially going from one scene into another. There was a good use of fading denoting that the plot line had yet not finished.

The first act ended suitably with the same music as it had begun.

Act two moves at an exhaustible pace and if this is not attacked with commitment and energy can fall flat. I was pleased to observe that this did not happen. The scene changes were executed with precision being as integral to the plot as are the actors’ razor-sharp exchanges.

It is during the second act that we observe the change in the characters, be it from the past or the future. This is Ayckbourn at his best. Already having set up Gerry and Laura in the present, through his characters he gets his audience to ask if we can live in the moment and appreciate it. In other words do we really ever understand that we are having the time of our life? This theme was skilfully developed by the actors’ delivery of dialogue and “being in

the moment". This can only be achieved in a production of this type by a director who understands actors and the process that is undertaken. This was evident in this case.

This play does not call for a great deal of movement and if not character led can become static and boring. It was clear that a great deal of work had been developed within the rehearsal process on character development and this was evident.

This was a production that was poignant and sharp in its execution leaving the community of Kingsley feeling that they had indeed, if only for one night, had the time of their lives.

General Note

This was my first visit to Kingsley and I would like to thank Lynn Pegler for your hospitality and making me feel so welcome.

Michaela Warrilow - Adjudicator