

Parish Players – Sisterly Feelings 22/05/2010

I had no idea what to expect when attending Sisterly Feelings on Saturday but I am delighted to say that Parish Players and guest director Jeff Graves gave us a playful, sophisticated and thoroughly enjoyable production.

In the opening scene we see a family just after they have attended the funeral of matriarch Amy Matthews. We are introduced to Doctor Ralph Matthews, his daughters Abigail and Dorcas and their brother Melvyn. Also present are Stafford Wilkins, a failed poet who Dorcas is (rather begrudgingly) dating and living with, Melvyn's rather needy, wasp-hating fiancée Brenda Grimshaw, her athletic, well-travelled brother Simon, Abigail's wealthy husband Patrick, Len Coker - the late Mrs Matthews' brother (an overly enthusiastic policeman) and his wife Rita. Immediately we are invited to observe this interesting family unit and all its flaws. We see the various strains and all too familiar family bickering, and as a result we are instantly drawn into the world of these fantastic characters.

So to scene two - a chaotic picnic scene that continues with the feeling of 'theatrical soap opera.' At the end of scene one, Patrick storms off to a meeting, leaving too many passengers for the remaining car so the toss of a coin decides which sister will walk home with the gorgeous Simon. If it's heads then Abigail gets the man, Dorcas organises the sandwiches and it is Patrick's unexpected arrival which disrupts the family outing. Tails and Dorcas wins, Abigail caters, and Stafford is the intruder at the picnic. In this case it was Abigail's turn to win Simon and this left an opportunity for Chrissy Watson to steal the show with her portrayal of Dorcas in the picnic scene. From the very start of this, we see Dorcas's anxious attempts at making this day a success. From frantically laying picnic blankets and ordering Stafford to be on his best behaviour, to keeping a worryingly close eye on the nut sandwiches, Chrissy presented an extremely funny, very endearing character which made the small scene between Dorcas and Simon where he tells her she is beautiful, very touching and completely believable.

Another character that I instantly warmed to was Len Coker played by Roy Perryment. Len's pride in police work and his obsession with putting an end to the 'unnatural practices' that were taking place on the common all add to a potentially hilarious character. Thankfully, Roy's comic timing was impeccable and the fact that he bore an uncanny resemblance to Inspector Gadget in his long grey coat and glasses only made his seriousness more amusing. Similarly, praise must go to Caryl Court for creating a quietly amusing Rita Coker with her parrot-like mumblings and admirable physicality.

There is always a danger of distraction and confusion in scenes like this where the entire cast are present. The actors must remain in character and keep a realistic feel to the scene without becoming distracting. Luckily, the cast got this spot on and all 'background acting' was interesting and humorous but not off-putting. For example I couldn't stop myself from watching Caroline Chick whenever she was having an 'episode' as Brenda, but her awareness on stage meant that she never upstaged the actors who were featured. Max Perryment was equally as strong as Melvyn and he showed an excellent knowledge of stage craft. Together, they were extremely watchable and presented a down-to-earth, sweet couple.

When the rain comes at the end of Dorcas's picnic Abigail can choose whether to accept a lift home in Patrick's Mercedes or cycle back with Simon who she is now having an affair with. In this case, scene three was Abigail and Simon's night under the stars (although Simon comes fully equipped with a tent and gas stove much to Abigail's disappointment). Following this route through the script, meant we were in for a real treat. I feel kudos must go to both Hugh Edwards and Andrea Matsell for their incredibly brave strip teases in this scene! However, the scene is rather long and the lighting was dim throughout, which may have accounted for a slight loss of the audience's attention at points. As a result I was grateful for the bursts of energy coming from Len's falsetto screeches for Trixy the dog from offstage and the little comical touches such as Simon highlighting Abigail's singing habits during sex! (And may I say both actors have lovely singing voices). We warm to Simon greatly in this scene, probably partially due to Abigail's contrasting personality which at this point is harsh and ungrateful. Hugh showed Simon's character brilliantly and the little touches such as the way he rather embarrassedly flashed a torch and joined in flippantly with Abigail's stripper song made us both cringe at him and love him.

I will add here a thought about the scene changes. It seemed such a shame to have the stage crew come on at the end of this scene to remove the tent and other props. Could Abigail, Simon and Patrick have cleared the stage perhaps as an extension of this awkward situation? It was the first time we saw (or at least had noticed) the stage crew and I feel the mood was somewhat broken by these unknown bodies in black.

Talking of stage effects, the choice of music and sound were apt and appropriate, and efficiently supplied by Robin Cheetham and Liam Carroll. It always seems a slight cop out to state that not noticing the lighting changes means the operators have done an excellent job, but in this show the key word is unobtrusive. And that is a compliment.

The direction from Jeff Graves was generally excellent I feel – simple and true to the play. The stage was used very well and I particularly like the positioning of certain characters so that they have their own place on the stage. Stafford was almost always downstage left and Abigail, Simon and Patrick downstage right in group scenes for example. A large part of the Director's role is, of course casting, and there was a special chemistry between all of the cast and between the various pairs of actors. In particular the two sisters worked extremely well with each other and the pace of dialogue was quick and clear. Phil Matcham was more than successful in showing Patrick Smythe's bizarrely understanding attitude to his wife's affair and I did find myself sympathising with him greatly. David Golder's frank and honest delivery of Ralph's lines made his character all the more charming. All in all, I felt that this production of *Sisterly Feelings* was enormously enjoyable, hugely amusing and quite often touching. Bravo old beans!