

North Essex Theatre Guild

Full-Length Play Festival 2012-13

Wickham Bishops Drama Club

Fawlty Towers – by John Cleese and Connie Booth

Saturday 13th April 2013

Adjudicator: Will Hooper

Introduction

While opinion may differ on which is the greatest TV sitcom of all time, there is no doubting the masterful writing, casting, performing and indeed editing of Fawlty Towers. 12 episodes were made, nearly all of which were perfectly-structured mini-farces.

The plotting was wonderfully tight, the acting was spot on, and the way the scenes were edited meant that not a second of viewing time is wasted. Oh, and they happened to be jolly funny as well!

Such is the renown of these mini-masterpieces and people's familiarity with the performances, that producing three of them live on stage must be something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, people will certainly delight in seeing them again; but on the other, there is the pressure to deliver something akin to what people remember. Given the quality of the original, this is no simple challenge.

However, I think it is possible to present these episodes as a sort-of affectionate homage to the show, providing the audience with the setting, the familiar characters, the extremely-funny situations and lines; and, with whole-hearted performances, make for a highly-enjoyable evening. It was with these hopes that I arrived at the venue.

Front-of-House

The venue in question, Wickham Bishops Village Hall, is extremely pleasant, and a very comfortable place in which to stage a play – at least from the audience's

perspective. The front-of-house team added to the comfort with a friendly and efficient welcome – very much appreciated. The seat was extremely comfortable and well-appointed, and the programme interesting and informative.

Set design, construction and properties

As mentioned in my introduction, an audience will have certain expectations about a production of *Fawlty Towers*: how the set looks will certainly be very fixed in people's minds. As a result, there was very little room for manoeuvre when constructing the set for this production.

The design and layout that was created worked extremely well. It looked completely recognisable, and had all the appropriate working doorways. In 'The Builders', of course, structural alterations had to be made in quick time, and these were done with great efficiency. Also, because of the nature of farces generally, and these farces in particular, there is a great emphasis on coming in and out of rooms, opening and closing doors. They need to work properly, and they certainly did.

All the fixtures and fittings were in place, with the reception desk, an excellent letter rack, and important items like the fire alarm!

The scenes away from the reception area, such as Mrs Richards' bedroom, the hospital ward and the dining room for the Germans, all took place downstage, and, I thought, worked extremely well. There was no need for any more elaborate setting for these. The location was clear and the simple furniture used in these short scenes did their job very effectively.

The lettering on the *Fawlty Towers* sign, down-stage left, worked well, and was clear for all the audience to see, as the boys changed the order around.

Finally, I loved the Moose - absolutely splendid!

Lighting and Sound

Lighting in this production was reasonably straightforward – lighting the stage as a whole, with blackouts at appropriate moments, and focus in on certain parts of the stage at times where it was being used for a difference scene, as with the hospital scene for example.

The only moment where it didn't quite work was at the end of this hospital scene, where Basil says to the doctor: "Quite painful?", and then claps his hands together, rubbing them together at the prospect. Unfortunately the blackout came in marginally too quickly at this point, so snuffing out this particularly amusing moment. But this is mere quibbling – otherwise it worked very well.

Sound, when needed, as for the fire alarm and the telephone, was well-pitched and served its purpose well. The music used in between various scenes, for example to cover when the boys were changing the lettering worked well – indeed, using the familiar Fawlty Towers music was highly appropriate.

Costumes and Make-up

If the audience had certain expectations over the set, they'll also have had expectations about the costumes. They may not be able to remember specifically what each character wore, but once they saw them on stage, they would jar if not entirely appropriate.

I'd really like, therefore, to praise you for the attention to detail that went into these costumes. They had to be spot on, and they were. Basil's suits were perfect – I really appreciated the fact that you achieved a perfect match for the bizarre jacket he wore in *The Builders*. Sybil's outfits were suitably varied and colourful, while Polly's maid outfit, and Manuel's waiter's garb all fitted the bill perfectly.

The other characters wore clothing that met the parts and conveyed their characters very well, such as with the Major and Miss Gatsby and Miss Tibbs. The likes of the builders and the doctor also looked the part. It was understandable that the builder who punches Manuel had to wear a false beard ("Which one of you is man with beard"). In all, nothing looked out of place, and, more than that, everything looked pretty much as one could have hoped. Well done.

Production

As I said in my introduction, I think any group would be hard-pressed to replicate on stage the episodes as remembered from the TV. It certainly wasn't my expectation that this would be possible. They are different media for a start. Also, the performances of the pitch-perfect cast were inimitable, and, I think, unrepeatable. Finally, the editing available to TV producers was able to cut out any spare moment, to ensure an entirely flawless and totally sharp production.

This is not possible on stage. What this production did do though, is faithfully reproduce the three episodes, with a highly-laudable loyalty to the originals, and a clear desire to deliver the lines with pace and sharpness, and so achieve a fair replica of the original.

In this regard they didn't disappoint. The aspects of comic timing, of pacy dialogue, of farcical situations and a hefty dose of slapstick, were each taken on, and the result was entertaining and amusing. The commitment to pace dialogue was good. The clear attempt by cast members to perform as per the originals

was good, and the willingness to move about the stage and really get stuck in to the physicality of the writing was really pleasing.

As always with slapstick, particularly with violence, it needs to be done with total and utter commitment and force. Quite understandably, this didn't quite come across. Notably in the sequence where Sybil is attacking Basil and O'Reilly, she really needs to let them have it. Ironically, even Prunella Scales didn't quite give it the welly it needed with the umbrella, so it's quite understandable that this didn't quite pack the punch that it could. But, some of the violence towards Manuel looked pretty genuine, and effective as a result. And fair play to all involved. These episodes take a huge amount of commitment from the cast, and we certainly saw that in action.

The movement around the stage was good, and you coped well with the scenes off-stage, with a smooth efficiency about any scene changes. The business around the fire drill and the moose worked well, and there was a general feeling of a cast which had rehearsed well and was working well together.

The Acting

As mentioned above, I thought there was a good commitment from the cast to tackle the facets of this comedy, and to capture, as much as possible, the essence of the original characters. Movement looked good, and lines were delivered with good projection. There were some moments where the pace dropped a bit, when it needed to press on at all times. But I felt the cast made a laudable job of what was a difficult undertaking.

The Hotel Regulars

Basil Fawlty – Glenn Massey

I've mentioned already how difficult I think it is to try to replicate the immortal original performances from this show. In the case of replicating John Cleese, I believe it to be nigh-on impossible. That said, it would be totally unfair to judge Glenn's performance against Cleese's. I felt Glenn really got into the part very well. He showed a clear understanding of the range of the role, the demands of it, and a willingness to tackle each facet as boldly as he could. He timed his lines well, reacted effectively opposite the other characters, and worked up a realistic head of steam. His slapstick moments worked well, and the energy level didn't seem to sag, despite the fact that this must be such a tiring role to play – and three episodes in one evening. He went for it when it came to the more hysterical moments, not shying away from giving it his all. Glenn even managed to capture some of the physicality of the part, bravely doing the funny walk at the

end of the The Germans. A really good effort at what I'd consider the impossible part.

Sybil Fawlty – Linda Burgess

Of all the 'hotel regulars' I felt Linda came closest to achieving a replica of the original – not that that is, in itself, the main aim of the performance, but noteworthy nonetheless. There were lots of the familiar mannerisms, a very good voice, and effective movement about the stage. Her reactions to Basil and the other characters looked natural, and she conveyed the essence of the character very effectively. As I mentioned earlier, I think she could have been more forceful when it came to the violence. "She can kill a man at 10 paces with a blow of her tongue" really is more effective if it actually looks as though the potential is genuinely there. But I fully realise this is easier said than done, and did not detract from what was an enjoyable, well-rounded performance.

Manuel – Jim Self

It is the hallmark of this production that the main actors quite visibly got into the spirit of the show. This was very much the case with Jim's Manuel. It's a lot harder to play such a role than it might seem. There could, on the face of it, be a lot of easy laughs, but this isn't the case. It has to be acted properly, and the part taken seriously. Then the laughs can come. And Jim certainly seemed to take his role very seriously. He looked the part, and sounded it, with a nice Spanish accent. His movement around the stage was not played-up, and he had an appropriate look of keen innocence about him. What's more, he took the blows which came his way with fortitude, reacting well; in the process, adding greatly to the ensemble acting of the cast.

Polly Sherman – Anne-Marie Latter

Polly can often be seen as a straight part, without the comic high points of the other characters. But Polly is an essential part of the mix, and Anne-Marie played the role very effectively. As with the others, she certainly looked the part, and spoke with a calm authority. Calmness while all about are losing their heads is very much part of the Polly character, and this came across well. She interacted nicely with the other characters, kept a good, confident pace going, and contributed very much to the enjoyment of the show.

Major Gowen – Malcolm Lealan

Yet another of these immortal characters. The Major really is a gift of a character part, often with not much to say, except perhaps "Papers arrived yet, Fawlty?", but sometimes becoming inextricably woven into the plot, as with 'Communication Problems'. The 'old buffer' type really can come to the fore

here, with a general forgetfulness and a somewhat confused attitude to much that's going on around him. I felt Malcolm managed this well. He had a nice, easy manner, and came across as believable in this role. There were times when perhaps his dialogue could have been delivered a little more sharply, but generally, he spoke with clarity and volume, and with an amusing aside or two made an enjoyable contribution.

Miss Tibbs and Miss Gatsby – Ann Hewett and Jenny Higgins

In many ways like the Major, these two elderly ladies come in and out of the action, but play an enjoyable role as regular guests, again, rather confused with all that's going on around them. Again as with the major, it would be easy to get carried away and over-do their eccentricities. Ann and Jenny managed to avoid this trap and took to these parts well. They are a sort of double act, and this is how they came across. Their short bits of dialogue, with Basil and other cast members, were well-paced and not over-played. As such they were enjoyable to watch and fitted in very well with all the goings-on!

Young Hooligans – Ben Howard and Archie Gunton

Both Ben and Archie looked the part as they scrambled on to fiddle around with the letters. These were necessary breaks in proceedings, and the two boys did their job well. It's not as easy as one might think, switching the letters around and trying to remember the words you're supposed to be creating, particularly with an audience watching. However, well done to both of them as they managed it very well.

Other characters

Mr O'Reilly / Mr Firkins / Doctor / German Guest – Len Howard

Len had some enjoyable little cameos to play and played them well. In particular, his O'Reilly hit the right notes, and got across the whimsical Irish character, more keen on having another biscuit than on getting on with the job. I also enjoyed his Doctor – a small part, understated, and highly effective.

Mr Lurphy / Mr Stubbs / Mr Mackintosh / Mr Sharp / German Guest – Colin Bellett

A busy time for Colin as well, with a number of small roles. His Lurphy contrasted nicely with his Mr Stubbs, where he looked the part as the more authoritative and qualified builder, reacting well when realising what a dangerously botched job had been done.

Mr Bennion / Mr Thurston / Terry / Mr Kerr – Roger Lyons

Roger was yet another member of this talented cast to show his versatility, again playing a number of different roles distinctively. His Irish Bennion contrasting with Mr Thurston, and then a very likeable Terry, in an enjoyable scene.

Mr Yardley / German Guest – David Higgins

Again, a couple of small roles, but well played, and fitting in very nicely with the action – most notably in the Germans with very good reactions to all the increasing madness and insults that were plying around!

Mrs Richards / German Guest – Pauline Roast

Another great role here. Pauline seemed to relish the dreadful Mrs Richards, really getting stuck into the part. She had a very good strong voice, and carried herself with a strong bearing as well – just what was needed. Her bemused reactions to the characters around her “C K What?” were highly fitting and amusing.

Taxi Driver / German Guest – Debbie Irby

Another two, very different and contrasting, cameos, well played.

Sister – Anne Dobinson

Really one for laughs this, something that Anne was able to achieve. She quickly and effectively conveyed the authority and character of the Sister, which then made the jokes at her expense all the more effective.

Mrs Sharp / German Guest – Anne Bellett

Anne played these two roles very nicely and enjoyable, reacting well to what was going on around her.

Large Woman – Cynthia Stead

Perhaps the least-flattering of character names! However, Cynthia played the part well, getting fully into the spirit of the piece.

Summation

I believe taking on three episodes of such a classic TV sitcom is actually a very brave choice. More than any other, the performances in Fawlty Towers cannot realistically be replicated. However, what Wickham Bishops Drama Club have done with this evening's entertainment, is place on stage a well-thought-through, and well-rehearsed version of the three episodes, which drew out the humour, the colourful characters, and the wonderfully-constructed plots, and made for a highly-entertaining and amusing evening.

I can remember nearly every word from these shows, but it was a pleasure to revisit them for this production.

Thank you all for an enjoyable and entertaining evening. I look forward to coming back and seeing you again very soon.

Will Hooper (adjudicator)
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