

**NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD**  
**FULL-LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL 2011-12**

**Group: Wickham Bishops Drama Club**

**Production: The Unexpected Guest by Agatha Christie**

**Adjudication Date: Friday April 13, 2012**

**Adjudicator: Liz Mullen**

**Introduction:**

Agatha Christie can be relied upon to provide a teasing evening's theatre, and *The Unexpected Guest* is more teasing than most. There are some decent red herrings and a denouement that, perhaps, not everyone would have guessed.

The Club deserved a slightly bigger audience on the night of my visit, but perhaps that was the Friday The 13<sup>th</sup> effect.

**Front Of House:**

Always friendly and efficient, with Clive Allen as amiable and solicitous as ever in ushering me to my seat and conjuring up an interval coffee.

**SETTING & PROPS:**

Always a boon to a group when only one set is needed, and in this case it was Richard Warwick's study – though the stage gave us a study the size of a spacious drawing room.

The French windows were imposing especially as lighting and fog effects added to their sense of the sinister.

Everywhere were mementoes from an African game-hunting past: animal skins, masks, elephant and giraffe ornaments. Other props looked in period, from the silver cigarettes case and stylish lighter to the telephone, pistol and decanter.

The walls were brown, but there were crimson splashes provided by curtains, tartan rug etc. The furniture was solid and respectable.

## **LIGHTING & SOUND:**

The moody music, the night-time exterior lighting, the mournful fog horn, and the encroaching fog itself provided a good atmosphere of tension. All these came together well at the start of the drama, as the “unexpected guest” enters the dark room to discover a dead body and a wife apparently guilty of doing the deed.

## **COSTUMES:**

Laura looked very stylish in her full-skirted emerald dress, with dark hair swept to one side. Generally the cast’s costumes had been carefully chosen to reflect the era and the characters.

Angell’s suit seemed to me to appropriate for a valet/butler of the late 1950s, and I liked the hair and moustache.

The men’s clothes had an air of authenticity on the whole, though I found the Inspector’s suit too modern-looking.

I was more convinced by the young PC (wisely not played as an older Sergeant). You could argue that his hair should have been a little more conventional (slicked-back perhaps, like Angell’s) and that it was more of an early 60s mop-top - but this was not a matter of great distraction.

Although Michael Starkwedder’s clothing was fine – and it was good to see that both he and the Inspector had bothered with hats – his hair was a bone of contention. It was far too long for the period. Young men really should be prepared to have their hair cut for productions – it soon grows back, too. Starkwedder’s hair and suit (and indeed Dafydd’s looks) made him an astounding lookalike of the current Dr Who.

## **ACTING:**

### **Laura Warwick:**

In the opening scene, it was not easy to believe that Anne-Marie Latter had just discovered (or killed) her husband. Even though she didn’t love him, we didn’t get enough conviction of whatever she was or was not feeling. But Anne-Marie moved with awareness of the conventions of the period and wielded her cigarette with great elegance. She showed us a needy, vulnerable woman.

**Michael Starkwedder:**

Despite Dafydd's hair being wrong for the role, his character was enjoyable quirky and sardonic, with a watchful quality (explained by the denouement). This was an assured and confident performance.

**Miss Bennett:**

Rather young and attractive for the role, Laura Kittle still gave us a focussed performance that had us wondering if "Benny" had something to hide.

**Jan Warwick:**

I was impressed by James Milne as the simple-minded and increasingly unbalanced Jan. This was a mature understanding of a role by this young actor. I look forward to seeing more of James's work.

**Mrs Warwick:**

Carol Munt delivered her dialogue in a slightly stilted way. More belief in the character and what she was really feeling would have enhanced this characterisation.

**Henry Angell:**

Jack Williams is an actor I love to watch. He has confidence, composure and seems to act from *inside* which is what I look for. His eyes can be shrewd or guarded, and we had both here. As the valet using blackmail to ensure his future, he gave us a well-rounded character treading a fine line between politeness and sheer ruthlessness.

**Cadwallader:**

As a young actor of only 16, Steven Barham was sensibly cast as a PC not the intended Sergeant of the script (and programme). I enjoyed his performance with its blend of eagerness and lack of attention. The teamwork with Ian Lodge as the Inspector was really good. Steven seemed at ease on stage and in the part. Hopefully there will be more to come from him.

**Inspector Thomas:**

Ian Lodge, I suspect, had helped to craft the believable partnership between the experienced Inspector and his young PC. The teamwork shone through and Ian's pace was always good. He took charge of his role with ease.

**Julian Farrar:**

No quarrel with Len Howard's more than capable acting, but I did feel there had been no attempt to make this Major look a little nearer to Laura's age. As it was, describing him as her "boyfriend" did – with respect – sound odd.

**DIRECTION:**

Sue Matten's production used the stage well, and kept the characters on the move and out of each other's way, which provided pace and interest. A prime example was when the Major escorted Mrs Warwick to the door – which cleared the way for Angell.

It is always gratifying when a director clearly stands back and really looks at the stage from the audience's point of view, and I suspect Sue does this.

The audience undoubtedly came away entertained and by this popular play from the doyenne of crime writing. This was a lot of hard work and effort for such a short run, so I hope it was enjoyed by even more people on its second night.

**Best wishes**

Liz Mullen  
Adjudicator