

SHEILA'S ISLAND
KATS – Kingsbridge
Director – Mike Davies
Sept 2024

This was a play new to me, and as expected from this group, it was given an excellent production. This is the female version of an earlier play (with male cast) by Tim Firth (Nevilles Island) about 4 women on a firms team building exercise in the Lake District. They are put together as one of the smaller sub teams, but things do not go according to plan and they end up stuck on an island, lost, soggy and stranded, in the middle of a lake. As it turns out they are really not far from safety, but they do not realise this.

As things gradually get out of hand we see personality traits that are probably held in check in the office, come to the fore. In the original male version of the play these were portrayed as traits of toxic masculinity and there was a better more female influenced world out there. Now, it seems that all the world, male or female, is equally petty, competitive and cruel. These characters reaction to the situation they find themselves in becomes ever more hysterical and over the top, and is totally out of proportion to the threat they are facing. This is what drives the comedy in this play, although there are darker sub themes that give the production a bit of meat.

Given the cast is just 4 strong, good casting is essential and here KATS fielded 4 superb performers.

Sheila, the somewhat bossy team leader, was given an excellent portrayal by an actress we normally associate more with musicals, but here she proved she is more than a match for the role as she desperately tries to keep spirits up as the emotional baggage that the rest of the team have brought with them threatens any hope of team building.

Denise is the character that perhaps dominates the production. She is the vicious sharp tongued loner, and gradually unravels as the play progresses. KATS Chairperson played this role with relish. This is a character that you may wish to avoid in a social setting and she was portrayed as such and the gradual increase in hysteria was well played.

Fay is the fragile, hymn spouting, bird watching, religious type, with a history of poor mental health, but ultimately appears to be the only one of the four who actually ends up doing something constructive. The others pussy foot around the subject of her mental health for some time, and extract laughs from her supposedly being a bit potty, then equally supposedly being a bit of a threat. This character was given an excellent portrayal and touched on the frailties beautifully. It is not easy exploring the theme of mental health but it was done very well here and with just enough of a light touch to ensure the audience did not feel unduly uncomfortable.

Julie is absurdly over equipped, and this produces quite a lot of the humour. This grates with Denise and produces some good comic conflict. One can imagine this character being a bit of the office do gooder, someone who is well meaning but can easily end up grating with peopole. This was nicely portrayed.

Direction ensured that pace was swift and tension was built up as necessary, nicely blending with the comic element. We see the 4 women, who presumably get on well enough in the office, gradually end up at each others throats as office power dynamics come to the fore. Direction explored all the themes in suitable depth and clearly, with very adept actresses, the frailties were well displayed.

The superb set, produced in house, with real foliage, added to the realism and the characters were wet and soggy when needed. Excellent lighting and sound effects added to the overall effect.

The programme states that anyone who has been on an office team building exercise might find much to empathise with in this play. Thankfully I have never been on such an exercise – the thought terrifies me – and as such I did find some of this play a trifle uncomfortable, in a good way. I was imagining who in my office might be the characters represented here.

This was an excellent evening and once again KATS autumn play offering did not disappoint at all.

