

PLAY ON (by Rick Abbot)

Kats – Kingsbridge

Malborough Village Hall – Sat 27th Sept

Dir – Christine Bonner and Jules McColl

This was a new one for me, and what a wonderful evening it was. This play is a hilarious farce that affectionately pokes fun at the world of amateur theatre. I am always a bit wary of such plays as they tend to foster the idea that am-dram is chaotic, unprofessional and to be mocked in real life. However, this play is so well written that one can overlook that, and follows a small, bumbling dramatic society (PRATS – Parcombe Regis Theatrical Society) attempting to stage a new murder mystery play entitled “Murder Most Foul”. Unfortunately, everything that could go wrong, does go wrong, and this is not helped by clashing egos, and a playwright who is constantly re-writing the script.

This must have been a very difficult play to rehearse as the bulk of the company have 2 roles (their society member character and also the character they are playing in the production being rehearsed). In addition, the same scenes are rehearsed over and over again, which is a good ploy as the audience become as familiar with Murder Most Foul as the cast. We know what is coming and what is meant to happen and thus it is all the more entertaining when things go wrong.

There are several themes at play here. The central one being the chaos of creativity – and we all know about that one. Art rarely goes as planned. The struggle to rehearse the play and the constant re-writes by the playwright add to the tension between artistic vision and practical execution.

A further theme is Perseverance and Passion. Despite the constant setbacks, the cast and team never give up. There is perseverance in the face of failure, and this is a theme that resonates with us all. All the cast demonstrated relentless energy even when everything is falling apart, and this makes the play quite endearing.

The show within a show structure of the play blurs the line between fiction and reality. The real frustrations and personalities begin to be mirrored in the play they are rehearsing. The play is used to comment on how performance and rehearsal often overlap with reality. This is another theme we are all familiar with.

Another theme beautifully demonstrated by this cast is that of the absurdity of Human Ego. Every character really demonstrated their quirks ranging from egotism to insecurity and this satirises the fragile egos we all come up against in our own theatre groups. Pride and vanity can often turn collaboration into chaos.

Although the bulk of the cast play dual characters, there are three (Murder Most Fouls creative team) who play the same character throughout.

Gerry Dunbar was beautifully played by this experienced actress (who also co-directed in real life). This character is the weary centre of the storm, increasingly desperate to hold everything together, and this frustration boiled over with her treatment of the playwright. She embodied the thankless task of the creative leadership role in amateur groups, always responsible, but rarely appreciated.

I loved the portrayal of Aggie Manville, the stage manager. The staging was ingenious in that one side of the set was placed open so we could see the stage managers seat in the wings. She was a grounded, often sarcastic, voice of reason among the madnesses. She is the unsung hero, as our stage managers often are. She was a nice counterbalance to the plays more exaggerated personalities.

Phyllis Montague is Murder Most Foul's interfering playwright, who just cannot leave her "baby" alone much to the growing frustration of everyone. This was a very entertaining performance. The temperamental artist was nicely balanced with genuine enthusiasm for her work. We ultimately felt quite sorry for her when it all falls apart.

The remaining 6 cast members all play dual characters.

Polly Benish (playing Lady Margaret in MMF) was played by the production's other real life co-director. This performer is a centre stone of Kats (and the chairman) and has probably experienced all of the themes demonstrated in the script. Clearly the Grand Dame of PRATS but also very conscious of her weight (which is constantly referred to by other characters). Her absurdity is nicely demonstrated when her Murder Most Foul costume doesn't fit, and she moves around the stage trying not to show off the gaping open dress.

Henry Benish (Polly's son) (Playing Lord Dudley in MMF) is really a young actor to watch in future. I have seen him in other productions here and he gave a very entertaining portrayal here. One of the more normal members of PRATS, my favourite part was when he opened the window and the entire frame came away in his hands. The audience was greatly amused by this. He aged well and his make up satirised how often make up in amateur productions can look a bit overdone.

Violet Imbrey (playing Diana Lassiter in MMF) reminded me very much of the female characters we find in Agatha Christie plays – house guests who seemingly have no real reason to be there but form a central part of the "house Party". Often having trouble with her memory for lines, this is well mirrored in her performance in the murder mystery. I especially loved the reactions of cast when the play finally gets an airing in front of an audience and they are frozen in fear on the stage, shaking with nerves hardly able to stutter their lines.

Marla Smitty Smith (playing Doris the Maid in MMF). We all have these members in our groups. Younger members who are trying to marry everything with schoolwork and school commitments and also parents not wanting their theatre commitment to become too much. This young Ukrainian actress nailed this perfectly, having to be told how to deliver certain lines, we've all been there.

Saul Watson (Playing Dr Rex Forbes in MMF). He is the origin of most of the digs against Polly Benish and their antagonism was well performed. His make up for Murder Most Foul was hilariously over the top and I loved the moustache transferring to the face of Violet Imbrey. The gathering panic and chaos of his performance when the play is actually presented was very entertaining.

Billy Carewe (Playing Stephen Sellers in MMF) was probably the most normal of PRATS members. Clearly enamoured with Violet, we certainly got the message that he would rather be off somewhere getting it away with her, than performing the play for PRATS. His liking for her transferred nicely into his performance as Stephen.

Each of these performers is a comic archetype such as the diva, the flirt, the clueless newcomer, the overconfident veteran and they all represented the many personalities we all know exist in amateur theatre. Their interactions were what principally drove the play's humour.

This play is much more than slapstick comedy (and it was VERY funny). It does capture the picture of collaboration and the beauty of imperfection. It also demonstrates what we all know – THE SHOW MUST GO ON.

Moving into reality, KATS played a blinder with this production. The set was, as always, perfect. I really loved the glimpse into the wings on one side which was necessary to see Aggie at work. Lighting and sound

were perfect. Unusually for a play, all the performers were radio miked. This was essential as much of the dialogue was quick fire and it would have been so easy to miss something had they not been miked.

The 2 co directors – Christine and Jules – really had a job and a half as they were both appearing in the production(s) as well. They had managed to ensure that the 6 characters with dual roles, very clearly found the differences as well as the similarities and it was clear that direction was very strong.

KATS plays are always very admirable, and this was one of my favourites. Bravo !!