



Be inspired by amateur theatre

Society : Panda Players
Production : Unprompted
Date : 29 June 2024
Venue : Hyde Heath Village Hall
Report by : Judith Watsham

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to see this production and many congratulations to all involved in this one! Thank you for your warm welcome Front of House manager Trish Lewis and Production Manager, Nikky Meeson, who filled me in on one or two aspects – including the fact that Amber Dye was responsible for the clowns' effective makeup.

Unfortunately, many amateur companies seem to be struggling at the moment, following the Covid lockdown, due perhaps to a mixture of steeply rising costs, resulting in high ticket prices, falling audience numbers plus, in some instances, a distinct lack of people willing to fill vital admin roles. Not so in the case of the Panda Players, however! I was so pleased to see the Pandas branching out and extending their performing season by departing from their usual annual format of one excellent big musical plus smaller entertainments from your Concert Party department and venturing to explore the demands of the Dramatic part of NODA. All right, I know there is drama aplenty in most musicals but, as I am sure you have discovered, putting on a play is a different thing entirely. Please do keep on with the idea of a small second show like this each year – even though I know it is a hard ask for all the tireless members of the Production Team to move on so quickly after the huge demands of a major musical – and now I am sure you are planning every aspect of your Spring 2025 production of *Annie!*

There have been many plays written round the concept of AmDram Societies – some are better than others - but this one by Matthew Dye worked well and even contained a mention of NODA, although I am sure no NODA Regional Rep in the UK, let alone our stalwart staff at Head Office, would write to one of their members demanding better seating – unless it was a joking remark! We, the reps, have all sat in uncomfortable seats, sometimes with bad sightlines, at times and accept this goes with the territory. Few village halls are renowned for luxurious seating, let alone some open-air venues on hard, backless benches or damp grass! This can never be the fault of the performers or their society!

This 'World Premiere' had elements of both farce and traditional whodunnit about it. Matthew not only penned but directed, alongside wife Amber, and starred in it! You developed a good selection of varied characters of mixed ages – all recognizable types to be found in most societies. As one of your members remarked to me recently, I do know many performers (not only amongst the Pandas) throughout London Districts 11 and 11A – as well as actors and singers in other Districts when I visit outside my own territory not to mention non-NODA groups! I recognized Matthew Dye in the cast, even though you used a *nom de plume!* However, I will use your assumed name in this report.

The pace was kept up throughout and the action never flagged. The whole cast showed energy and pace and a good understanding of the genre.

SM David Winney kept control well and had, I assume, helped to train the cast when it came to moving the props around. Props, incidentally, all good but no one person credited so congratulations all round. The cigarettes were excellent and glowed beautifully – although they did look very long – and the BBQ area with its selection of food and condiments was well laid out.

Costumes – Panda Players – again, all appropriate for the character concerned. I loved the legend on Cliff's apron – typical of one worn by men who take over the BBQ. Phylis's hippy outfit contrasted very well with the more conventional costumes worn by the rest of the cast (excepting the two clowns of course!)

Jezz Vaughan's lighting was fine, with appropriate lights 'inside' the house, and the simple one-page programme from martiarts design told us all we needed to know.

The set also worked well, I was especially impressed by the fact that when the two doors leading from the body of the Village Hall to the backstage area were opened what the audience saw, albeit briefly, added to the feel of a small, isolated dwelling as the visible hall walls had been hung with suitable coverings. One, working, interior door built into the set gave us a smallish space, I thought probably a cupboard (?) and the transition from decking to garden, complete with a barbecue was effective – all that was missing was the smell of burnt burgers!

Several of the actors had to communicate with (unseen and unheard) children in the garden (aka the auditorium) and this worked effectively in all cases. I almost looked behind me for the youngsters!

So to the cast (in programme order) – you were all very good, word and movement perfect, and you took on the varied characters – many of them very familiar to anyone who has ever been a member of an amdram group. You made excellent use of the available space too.

Alison Ruffelle played the older, and slightly dotty, character of Ethel very well. Excellent projection too and good expressions. Lovely reactions to the rest of the cast at all times

Amber Dye, as the Lady Clown, was always totally in character - good make-up as already mentioned and she acted well in her brief appearance. Lovely scream too!

Anya Vaughan-Smith played the role of Michelle, a harassed young mother, very believably – again, excellent facial expressions.

Cassie Winter took on the role of the sulky teenage Aubrey and played it very well with good moves and expressions. Your accent matched your 'mother's well too.

The part of the other Clown was taken by David Mundy – unrecognizable under the clown wig and face paint. A great costume too. You mastered all the miming well – and your few lines at the end were delivered with conviction. How you managed to stay still all that time, especially when being dragged around the stage I don't know!

What can I say about Joanne Day as Phylis – a totally different part for you which you mastered. You gave the audience a hippy-dippy, psychic, ‘away with the fairies’ lady and maintained the character with moves, expressions and dialogue throughout. Your ‘northern’ accent was consistently good (to my southern ear at any rate).

The part of the brash, boastful – not to mention very loud – Roy was taken by Laurence Connell. An excellent characterisation of someone who regards himself as the leading light of the group, without whom everything would fall apart – only to have his bubble of self-esteem well and truly broken when his financial mismanagement is revealed.

Hostess Raquel – Marion Raeburn-James – was the epitome of an AmDram committee member, anxiously hosting the AGM and associated social event. Lovely expressions, good clear dialogue and well-developed characterisation at all times.

Young, sex-mad Gareth, a very believable performance from Matt Winter. Totally in character all the time, laddish with the chaps, flirtatious with the women – again we have all met this type many times.

Robert Dadomo played the role of Raquel’s barbecuing husband Cliff and his constant fussing over the food was excellent, veering between his role of chef and that of an anxious husband who thought his wife was having an affair. You balanced your emotions well.

Congratulations Pandas! And thank you again for a most entertaining evening.

Judith Watsham

District 11 and 11A Rep NODA London