

NODA Review of Barton Players production of Barton Players - One Man Two Guvnors

Review by Richard Fitt

Wow! So that's the critically acclaimed play that helped propel James Corden to stratospheric stardom! Well it's certain different! Always wanted to see this but never had the opportunity before now. However, how to describe it? It's a play, a comedy, a farce with audience participation, a variety show, and certainly a vehicle for the lead character to adlib where necessary. Taken from a 1746 Italian comedy by Carlo Goldoni it has been updated by Richard Bean and set in Brighton in 1963 but still with a wholly unbelievable plot involving, a woman disguised as her dead brother, a gangster whose daughter is supposed to have married the dead brother, a would be, over the top, lovesick, actor, his father who is the gangster's Latin speaking crooked solicitor, a frustrated bookkeeper looking for a dirty weekend, an upper crust twit who had murdered the aforementioned dead brother and a very elderly waiter, to name but a small part of the many plots. I think I'd need to see it several more times to fully grasp the entire plot!

Well directed by John Murphy, The Barton Players bravely took this on in their very well-equipped village hall. All sets, which were box sets with movably flats, were built by Keith Bowie with the opening set being in the living room of gangster Charlie Clench's house. Other sets included the back of a pub, a dining scene with two doors for the standard farce sequence of trying to serve both Guvnors lunch at the same time, where hilariously none of the door furniture survived the scene and which later converted to two pink doors for two bedrooms suits. Oh yes, and to stage right a fully setup space for a band which opened the show and played between each scene. More later!

The Bowie monopoly of the backstage was completed with Keith providing the lighting and Adam the excellent sound effects, particularly well timed when Alfie was bouncing down the stairs. At least I hope that was sound effects, or the poor man would never last the run!!

The tour de force that is Keith Badham playing Francis Henshall was both chief musician and leading actor. He certainly is a talent, a master of

comedy, a natural stand-up and perfectly suited to this role, or rather these roles! Without an actor of this calibre this play wouldn't even get off base one. They even got around the problem of Henshall needing to be a bit tubby (i.e. James Corden) by padding the stomach of the much leaner leading man. Not entirely sure it was that convincing but hey ho, you can't have everything.

The Players are also lucky in being able to put together a pretty competent band from members of the cast, with that man Badham on lead guitar and vocals, Harold Liberty on bass guitar, Tom George on drums, Mick George on washboard and Philip Hargreaves on spoons. Pretty good they were too and never ones to miss a comedic opportunity, even making light of Keith continually forgetting to adjust the volume of his guitar and his strap falling off half way through a number. The music was certainly good fun with great numbers like 'The Brighton Line' and 'My old Man's a Gannet' Amongst other things this allowed the stage crew to do wholesale changes to the set at the same time. Clever, except there did still appear to be a lot of ugly pauses between the end of the musical numbers and the start of the next scene, which was a pity and did drop the pace in places. This was partly due of course to allow time for lead vocals to become leading man again. As I said you can't have everything.

Back to the acting. Although Henshaw is by far the main part in the show, the other roles played were none too shabby either. Tom George, fresh from his drum kit made a pretty good upper crust twit of Stanley Stubbers, one of Henshaw's two Guvnors, whilst Mick George, put the East End cheeky chappie into Gangster Charlie Clench, delivering great lines like, 'For twenty years me and Pauline's mother were happy and then unfortunately just by chance we met each other.' Fabulous stuff. Rachael Bowie gave her all as Rachel Crabbe, his other Guvnor, in disguise as her dead brother, Roscoe. In fact, the disguise was so convincing you hardly recognised her when she eventually appeared as herself. Sophie Bryant as Charlie's daughter Pauline, kicked and stamped her metaphorical feet up and down in all the right places at her father's plan for a marriage of convenience to the homosexual Roscoe (The word 'gay' had an entirely different meaning in 1963!). Whilst her absurdly over the top would be actor boyfriend Alan Dangle, played by George Horn assumed the stance and delivered all his lines as if in the middle of a Shakespearian tragedy. Great comic stuff and we luvvies can all relate to people we have met like that. Meanwhile his father Harry Dangle, played by Philip Hargreaves oozed crooked slipperiness as Charlie's bent solicitor, whilst pretending to

be a learned man by spouting Latin at every opportunity. Harold Liberty as Lloyd Boateng, Charlie's old 'friend' i.e partner in crime, played a pretty straight bat, but still with some great punch lines such as when asked 'What do you call somebody who likes to inflict pain?' answers in all sincerity, 'Police officer!' Great delivery! Christine Ayres was just perfect as the apparently demur bookkeeper Dolly, secretly relishing the thought of a dirty fortnight in Majorca with Henshall! Loved it! Alan Baldwin as Gareth the Maitre'd and Brian Coffey as the 86 year old waiter Alfie on his first day at work (who writes this stuff!) provided the slapstick element of this farce, Alfie continually falling down the stairs on to every part of his anatomy except his feet. Sounded painful!! Meanwhile Gill George, Claire Coffey and Derryanne Blunt appeared at various points in various roles including a policewoman in a clearly ill-fitting uniform with the biggest pair of sergeant stripes it is possible to sew on to a uniform.

Congrats also to Claire Coffey and Derryanne Blunt for a splendid array of costumes especially the suit for Roscoe, aka Rachel.

I thoroughly enjoyed this in places, found it hilarious in others and other parts I didn't think quite worked, but I'm not sure if this was just the script or this production. The end of the first act looked like it ended in total disarray with stage hands rushing around sorting out the audience member who had just had food spilt all down her back, then (Spoiler alert - stop reading now if you haven't seen this before.) it turns out Christine Patterson is really a plant and a member of the company! Very clever, especially as there had already been two real audience members involved in the heavy trunk scene. It certainly had me fooled. She was so convincing, her acting as the 'I look stupid and I don't want to be here member of the audience' was just brilliant! So I remain slightly bemused and certainly look forward to seeing this again at some time in the future, if only to clarify my perspective on this zany work.

So well done to John Murphy and the company for a thoroughly entertaining evening, Barton-le-Clay is fast becoming one of my favourite places to visit. And thank you also for inviting my colleague Stephen Hayter and his wife, who also thoroughly enjoyed the balmy evening's entertainment.