



Society : The Chameleons Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : 'allo 'allo
Date : 22nd May 2010
Venue : Kingsland Hall, United Reform Church, East Lane, Wembley
Report by : Harvey Kesselman

Report

Expanding a half-hour situation comedy seen on TV once a week into a full-length play or film can be a problem. The same sight gags and funny dialogue that occur week after week, has the advantage that the viewing audience has a week's 'rest' before they see/hear the familiar catch phrases. The filming of such TV comedies: "Only Fools and Horses", "Steptoe and Son", "On the Buses" etc. has, in my opinion, never really worked. However, when 'allo 'allo was expanded to a full-length stage play in 1982, whilst still running on TV, it ran for ten years, proving that in that case I was wrong. The occasional professional performance probably will still be playing somewhere in years to come. Meanwhile we do have the opportunity to see some good productions put on by amateur groups.

With a simple set comprising a bar on stage left, behind which could be seen a variety of bottles, tables and chairs were set on stage right. At auditorium level on a raised dais a further table and chairs had been set. On the walls there were some rather faded pictures, a clock, menu and other suitable items that could be seen in a typical small rural café in France during the war (and possibly still applies today). In this case, "Café René", in the village of Nouvion in France, was frequented not only by the locals, but also by the occupying German officers. As with the TV series, the plot revolves around a painting "The Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies" by Van Clomp, hidden in a sausage, kept by the café's owner so that the German commandant can retrieve it after the war. As with the TV series, the play is full of double entendres, catch phrases, all are included. The forthcoming visit of Hitler causes great consternation amongst all the German Officers as well as the café owner. A plan is made to delay his visit and virtually the whole cast (including Edith) disguise themselves as The Fuehrer in order to obtain the painting, providing one of the funniest moments in the play. Of the original TV series, two of the principal characters were omitted in this adaptation, Fanny, Edith's mother, played by Rose Hill and Monsieur Alphonso, played by Kenneth Connor.

As the café proprietor, René Artois, **Stuart Everett** was excellent, with a very good stage 'French accent' that only occasionally slipped. Working unwillingly with the French Resistance whilst serving drinks to the occupying German officers. Further complications had arisen because he also happens to be hiding two British Airmen who kept popping up behind the bar at the most inconvenient times. Stuart was consistent throughout keeping well in character and his asides to the audience, endeavoring to explain what was going on, were amusing. The dalliances with both waitresses, much to the annoyance of his wife, were very funny. As Edith, René's wife, **Catherine Waters** seemed rather tentative at first, but 'grew' into the part very well. It was a shame that she did not actually perform the cabaret that is usually one of the funniest moments of the play; perhaps this was because there was really no room on the stage for a piano. Nevertheless, we all got the point when we saw all the cast, that were on stage, stuffing their ears in anticipation. Catherine looked a bit young for the part, but coped extremely well. The two waitresses, **Helen Downer** as Yvette Carte-Blanche, and **Kat Priest** as Mimi Lebonq, were both coquettish and sexy. Helen's dialogue was rather on the quiet side and needed more projection. Kat was inclined to rush her dialogue. However both performances were fine, and Kat using a stool and then a case to stand on in order to get a hug from René, was a nice touch (and funny), and Helen's amorous cuddles with René were delightful. **Nikki Amory's** acting as Michelle, the Resistance fighter was fine, but she delivered her dialogue rather too quietly. The 'immortal' catch phrase 'Listen carefully, I shall say this only once' was almost lost because of that. Her change of accent from French to English, when speaking to the two airmen, was fine, but

again needed to be more distinct. There was a very funny performance given by **Denis O'Brien** as Leclerc who kept coming into the café in various guises throughout. Bringing in the caged, stuffed parrot and explaining to René that it contained a two-way radio that could be activated by putting his finger into a certain orifice, was most amusing.

Ian Ramsdale was much too quiet as Crabtree. It's a gem of a part with its fractured French, but all those mispronounced words need projection and it was a pity that Ian was inclined to mumble his dialogue. He did seem rather uncomfortable in the part and rather nervous. However, I see by his biography, that this was his first production with The Chameleons, so perhaps with some further experience he will become more at ease on stage. There was also a problem with his uniform, which did not fit. The jacket's sleeves were too long, and the trousers rather sagged. I know, supposedly, he was a British spy and was only disguised as a French policeman, but more attention should have been paid to his uniform. There was an enjoyable performance by **Steve Angus** as the local commandant, Colonel Kurt von Strohm. The 'business' with the 'hair piece' was very funny and Steve played the whole scene with a straight face. He was aided and abetted by **Jason Kosky** who gave a very good performance as the very 'camp' Lieutenant Gruber. Never going OTT as could easily happen with this role, Jason was, in a quiet way, a hoot. I also did enjoy **Daniel Abbott's** Italian accent which, together with his smile, was most engaging, making the character of Captain Alberto Bertorelli into the typical pseudo Italian character one often sees in spoof comedies. **Robert Spolander** gave an outrageous and masterful performance as the man from the Gestapo. With his leather double-breasted coat, his gammy leg, exercising with swastika emblems on his shorts, and Helga, played by **Simone Lee-Tyrassek**, (who gradually became more convincing in the role) trying desperately to get her 'boss' to take more than a passing fancy to her and not really succeeding. Removing her outer garments and joining him, she hoped to arouse his passion, but Flick, being totally uninterested in her advances, just requires her to help him put on his trousers. That scene was hilarious. Although there were two airmen referred to in the play, and both were actually seen at the beginning, only one, **Ben Parker**, is listed in the programme as 'Airman'.

There are sixteen scenes in this play with eight different sets and, knowing the problem this could cause a company even with a much larger stage, I wondered how this production would cope given the dimensions of the rather small stage. The problem had been ingeniously solved by the Director, cleverly constructing a revolve in the centre at the back of the stage which, when used, with clever lighting, revealed small but clever sets leaving the basic set, the café, to remain on stage. The revolve was a clever idea and meant that the larder of the café; the Colonel's office; Herr Flick's Headquarters; the back room of the café; the General's office; René and Edith's bedroom, were all able to be seen without any interruption of long scene changes. Whilst the seating in the cinema was set on the raised dais in front of the stage. The set designed by **Craig Marshall** and **Robert Spolander** and constructed by **Den O'Brien** and company was clever; as well as being one of the Airmen, Stage Manager **Ben Parker** made certain all ran smoothly; Sound and Lighting was in the very capable hands of **John Jetten**; **Helen Stevens** was i/c costumes. All the properties seemed correct for the period. Many congratulations to the Director, **Craig Marshall** for a giving us a very good evenings entertainment. The revolve will be talked about for a long time and will possibly give The Chameleons the opportunity to broaden their choice of plays. The programme was well produced; the biographies and photographs of the cast were very informative. Finally our thanks go to **Kay Blackstaffe** who, as always, looked after Sylvia and myself.