

BARNET & DISTRICT DRAMA FESTIVAL 2010
ADJUDICATOR'S REPORT

CHAMELEONS ADS: "ALLO 'ALLO" by Jeremy Lloyd & David Croft
WEDNESDAY 19 MAY 2010

The Barnet and District Drama Festival is one of the best established of the London-area Drama Festivals, reflecting a history of competitive entries dating from the 60s. With adjudication dates stretching from February to May, it attracts a wide range of competing societies from the area, offering thirteen trophies in most aspects of stagecraft. It concludes with a final Awards Night in June. The number of entrants varies considerably from year to year. In 2010 10 Societies entered a broad range of productions staged in contrasting venues. There were, interestingly for Festival followers, 2 entries of the same play, Michael Frayn's sparkling 'Noises Off'. Adam Long's irreverent 'The Complete Works of William Shakespeare' also featured among the entries. Two comedies of substance were entered, Richard Crane's 'Under the Stars', and Peter Shaffer's 'Lettice and Lovage'. In comedy-drama, there was a production of Willy Russell's well renowned 'Educating Rita.' More traditional theatre was represented by the Wilde classic 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. Three entries were popular festival choices in light vein: Ray Cooney's politically-flavoured comedy-farce 'Out of Order', Neil Simon's early 'Barefoot in the Park', and, making a welcome first appearance in the Barnet Festival, the Chameleons ADS entered a production of the TV-celebrated 'Allo, 'Allo' in the Lloyd-Croft stage adaptation.

The Chameleons ADS came together in 1966, and were then known as the Neasden Methodist Church Drama Society. Their first straight productions date from 1967; and they staged their first pantomime in 1971. They have since staged two plays and a pantomime every year. Venues for the group's productions have varied over the years, ranging from the Kingsland Hall United Reform Church in Wembley, to the Travellers' Studio in Hatch End and Glaxo Smithkline in Greenford. The pantomimes, always a popular event and drawing full houses, are staged at the Brent Town Hall. Membership has inevitably changed since 1966, but at least one founder-member still works with the group. Reflecting its 1966 roots, the group rehearses its productions at the Neasden Methodist Church, where the annual Patrons' Evening is also held. For their production of 'Allo 'Allo' The Chameleons ADS returned to the Kingsland Hall at the United Reform Church in Wembley. The Kingsland Hall is a popular venue for a range of activities. Though the church hall has limited facilities, it is a popular and well-known venue. The hall has room for approximately 100 freestanding seats, and a traditional, slightly raised stage, with proscenium arch, at one end. The stage is shallow, and space in the wings is cramped; but there are good sight lines from most parts of the auditorium. There are dressing rooms at the rear, together with a small Green Room. Lighting desk, lighting bars and lamps need to be brought in and set up. For a church hall of this size, with its wooden flooring and high ceiling, the acoustics, particularly with a good house, are reasonable. The hall is used for a range of recreational events, and the Chameleons have limited access to the hall and stage in the last two weeks for set-building and final rehearsals.

The Chameleons' entry for the Barnet Festival was the stage adaptation of the hugely successful TV sit-com "Allo 'Allo" which ran originally for ten years from 1982 to 1992. Conceived as a parody of 'Secret Army', the show featured a range of

stereotypical French, German and English characters in well-established World War Two settings in occupied France. The jokes were broad and bawdy, included repeated gag lines for specific characters, and had cleverly concocted conventions for the pretended switching from language to language. In common with most TV sit-coms, the show also had its well-known introductory music, a specially composed theme tune with a French flavour and played on the accordion. Written by the highly successful writing team of Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft, another of whose many successes was 'Are You Being Served?', the show was also staged in an adaptation which toured nationally and internationally. In 2009 a new touring show was devised by the slightly changed team of Croft and Perry. The style and spirit of the adaptation remain true to the show, with the characters, jokes, repeated gag-lines, overall situations and continental flavour instantly recognisable, despite minor variations on the theme. The key question for any director of a new production, amateur or professional, is: do its players attempt to reproduce something as close as possible to the original, or make the characters their own?

The production had good all-round technical support. The script calls for multiple settings, and the problem was solved by exploiting all the possibilities of the hall and small stage. The arriving audience entered to an open set (and were smilingly offered refreshment by French waitresses, later recognised as Yvette and Mimi). The main set, Rene's café, had small tables, a corner bar and counter. Perhaps, and understandably, the only missing feature was a window on to the Nouvien square. It was painted white at upper level, and blueish at lower level, separated by a continuous stripe. This gave a bright and appropriate background, though the top cut-off was too abrupt and needed shading. At stage right, a dark, slatted door opened to a small shadowed space for the café larder. A revolve, centrally positioned, turned about to suggest the Colonel's office and Flick's headquarters. This insert, with darker colours and a painted bookcase, effectively changed the scene. The main set extended down to auditorium level with an extra table, and this forestage area was also used later as the cinema setting. With angled flats upstage, there were well-placed entrances at both sides for the onstage settings; and auditorium entrances were repeatedly, and effectively, used into the forestage area. The set was evocatively furnished and dressed. The tables were well set, with check tablecloths and flowers in vases, and there were framed paintings on the walls. The bar was surprisingly well stocked, and the large printed menu was rather lavish for the austere war years. The map of France, which would probably not have been allowed, nonetheless brought a Gallic flavour. There was a coat-stand, well hung with hat and coats, a well-positioned grandfather clock, candlestick and brooms. A nice feature was the old-style stove with angled pipe at stage left, though grubby heat stains on the surrounding walls had been forgotten. The extra props and dressing appeared unfailingly as the settings changed, including Hitler portrait, the indispensable Madonna and Boobies painting (by a talented backstage Van Klomp), Gestapo underpants, a variety of sausages, blow-up Hitler doll and wine in plenty. Some props, such as the larder contents, Le Clerc's cockatoos, or the painted office backdrop, were unavoidably pantomime. The lighting plot, run from a desk at the rear of the hall, used the limited resources well, focussing down from the broadly lit café to tighter areas suggesting office, cinema or bedroom, and keeping cues (such as instant blackout as candle is blown out) crisply. Blackouts between scenes were kept to a minimum, with few delays, and the scenes mostly flowed smoothly. The open set was nicely 'warmed' with soft lighting on audience entry. Sound cues were well taken, including snatches of music, the voiceovers

for the London signals, gunfire offstage and cabaret accompaniment. The jazz music on audience entry was inappropriate, and melodic accordion playing with continental flavour would better have suited the set ‘warming’ and then led into the established theme tune as the show began. Costumes were worn with conviction, the clomping boots and belted paunches of the German officers finding the right blend of military and comic. Rene himself, perhaps a shade too clean, was nevertheless every inch the harassed patron. The female roles were dressed with Gallic style, Edith retaining a well-butressed allure, Mimi and Yvette suitably provocative (and with nicely contrasting wigs of blond and brunette), and Michelle wearing her variety of disguises with great panache. Helga, tightly buttoned into uniform, was a revelation when the moment called for eye-popping display; and Crabtree was so neatly in policeman’s rig that it was difficult, until it happened, to imagine him out of it. A pleasing feature of the show was the attentive dressing of bit parts, the two airmen instant caricatures, and even the café customers a neat joke in striped jerseys and berets. Overall, the composite set was a model of ingenuity; and the set dressing, lighting and sound, effects and costuming, though inevitably on occasion blurring into pantomime, never failed to find the spirit of the show.

“Allo ‘Allo” is an unashamedly light-hearted show. But it can still be directed, and enacted, to the highest standards, and bring fun and enjoyment to the many fans of the genre. The main question for the director of the stage show is how to find the spirit of the original without offering merely a pale imitation. The Chameleons’ production offered an enjoyable compromise, the characters and situations always evoking the elaborate TV setting, but bringing a different flavour arising from the tight stage space. Rene became more prominent on the smaller stage, and the link between Rene as narrator and the audience accordingly more intimate. Pace was slow in the earlier sequences, but picked up well as the Cast found the spirit. Focus shifted smoothly from area to area, helped by crisp lighting changes and mostly unobtrusive changes of scene dressing. Even when Rene held the stage centrally there was good activity off the line, both at the upstage table at stage right (always a strong point), and the supportive table down left. The set, in terms of restocking the bar, cleaning and sweeping, changing the menu, changing flowers, wiping tables, attending to the stove etc, was not always integrated into the action, so that the stage picture, which should always have been busy, occasionally looked static. Movement was mostly good, brisk and emphatic, and the auditorium entrances made to appear natural. Grouping nearly always supported the focus of the narrative, and some stage pictures – such as Rene and Edith in bed, or Bertorelli and Helga at the cinema – were strikingly achieved with great economy of props and movement. Stage freezes were particularly well managed, and could well have been further incorporated at the director’s discretion. All available space was pressed into use on all settings, and, whether café, backroom, office or larder, the stage was made to seem bigger than it was, and there were no dead areas. Characters were encouraged to find their own individuality, and two or three of the Cast found new elements to incorporate; but there was considerable variation in projection, and some characters were not corrected for rushed or muted lines. The Cast was clearly directed to move lightly through the script to maintain narrative flow, so that, even with well-known lines (eg “I will say this only once”) or expected moves (eg amorous approaches to Rene), these moments were touched on but not forced. The scenes and situations were illuminated by the warm audience response to something half-familiar, the director’s evident affection for the story, and by the Cast’s relish and enjoyment in bringing it to renewed life.

The sizeable acting team brought a variety of talents and styles to the show. In the demanding lead role as narrator and participant, Rene had size, presence and credibility. He consistently maintained a blend of the sardonic and the bewildered, both in his relationships with his bar staff and customers, and in engaging asides to the audience. He connected particularly well with the audience before stepping back effortlessly into the narrative. For one so harassed, he occasionally seemed too tidy, clean and controlled, and there were passages of near-manic action when the actor might have introduced more hysteria in order to vary the character. He used a mobile and expressive face to good effect, and the French accent, with the occasional slippage, was cod enough to convey authenticity. The relationship with Edith was well suggested with just enough hint of past fondness to make the final embrace a welcome moment for the audience. Edith herself, stout and capable, seemed totally in role as the patron's busy wife, and it was easy to imagine her nagging Rene behind the scenes (a Sybil to his Fawlty); this was a believable partnership. But she also incorporated a beguiling note of ageing coquetterie, and her sparkling appearance in singing rig promised much: it was a disappointment that the audience was not treated to a cabaret performance! Occasionally, her lines arrived too fast, perhaps with the idea of contrasting with Rene's deliberate delivery; but she maintained her well-established sangfroid throughout the shenanigans of the plot. The two waitresses were a further delightful contrast: Yvette tall, vivacious, animated in voice and gesture, with a guttural "oh Rene", accompanied by a possessive cocked leg, even more impassioned than the original; and Mimi, small, busy, her smile beaming desire and bonhomie in equal measure, a Gallic blond bombshell. Yvette was at her comic best concentrating desperately to interpret Crabtree; Mimi found her best moments climbing up to embrace Rene, as if to pick apples from a tree. There was a striking contribution from Michelle, conveying her idiocies with total seriousness, and adapting to her changing rigs, from tart to policeman, with the same commitment. In the faster sequences there was a tendency to lose volume, but this was in keeping with a slightly softer reading of the part. Her entrances, usually via the auditorium, were always a treat for the audience, and, refreshingly, in her running gag line "I will say this only once" she found an altered, and intriguing, intonation.

The trio of German officers all hit off the paunched, short-haired and barking stereotype with ease, seemingly having learned their strutting and stamping at the same school. But they still achieved a range of endearing individual differences. Colonel Von Strohm managed a delightful blend of the child and the bully, wheedling one minute, barking orders the next. The personal vanity was nicely integrated, helped by an excellent sense of timing for the comic line. In the sausage passages at the upstage table, paired with Bertorelli, he found some of his best moments. Gruber, his voice in high register and his gait switching to a mincing sidle, courted Rene with smiles and glances which would not have been out of place in Romeo. The effectiveness of the reading lay in the contrast he achieved, outwardly another German martinet, yet suggesting in the delicate gestures and lovelorn eyes (as well as the lilting cadence of "my little tank") a soft-hearted misfit. In quite a different key, General Von Schmelling, peering myopically through his one eye, and moving through the café like an enraged bull, was fierce, bullying and audible throughout Nouvien. He showed huge relish for the authority of his lines ("I will consume their sausage"), and a particularly good feel for the well-placed pause. His sometime rival in authority, Herr Flick, was a nice study in the sinister, his studied limp, black leather and wide-brimmed hat a memorable image, a kind of Sandeman Port figure encountered in a nightmare. His delivery, whether to Germans, Frenchmen or Helga, had the same rasping authority; but a change of gear was sometimes needed, less overt and

interiorising the sinister, with more hiss and less bellow. His scenes with Helga provided some memorable moments, and his violin recital, as well as his tango solo, were tiny cameos of performance bravado. Helga herself, perhaps surprisingly in a show of this type, was given a slightly deeper reading. She certainly followed Flick's instructions to the letter, and her dishabille at least twice created unforgettable vignettes. But there was a Paxman-like disdain in her dealing with him which fascinatingly suggested that she had her own agenda. Certainly no Gestapo secretary has ever quite so successfully combined a tightly buttoned uniform and clipped diction, with hidden sex-appeal. Bertorelli's was a delightfully relaxed reading, suggesting low IQ and infinite optimism. With a gleaming smile broader than Julia Roberts', and Italian-style extravagance in his voice and gestures, he was a frisky pony among the German dray-horses, always raising the pace on his entrances. There was a quietly effective Crabtree (at times too quiet), neat and controlled, who established the character in his own way. Some of his French mispronunciations needed a more emphatic delivery for the audience to savour the moment. His best moments came during the pumping sequence when his ability to deadpan was best used. At the other end of the spectrum was Le Clerc, entering into the comic role with unrestrained enthusiasm and milking every moment for laughs. His pantomime persona, indulged entrances and zest in performance lifted the story at his every appearance. Two French peasants busily occupied the downstage table (and could have flirted in a Gallic way); and the two airmen furnished the pair of "Jolly good show" roles with jingoistic flamboyance.

In summary, "Allo 'Allo" was a fun Festival choice which, notwithstanding its lightweight nature, has its own challenges and difficulties. It was ingeniously set, the multiple settings spread all over and beyond the limited stage space. Set dressing was comprehensive, and properties well used. A creative lighting plot helped to shift focus from area to area, and good sound effects, including supportive theme music and voices off, enhanced the Gallic aura. After a slowish start, the pace picked up well, and was then maintained through to the frenetic climax. Good plotting kept the narrative focussed and the stage picture was well composed. The Cast covered the varied roles well, and mostly achieved variations on the originals without losing sight of loved figures, a notable compromise. This was a light-hearted evening of great fun and infectious enjoyment.

C E EVANS
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