

Report on ABSURD PERSON SINGULAR by Alan Ayckbourn

Group: Grayshott Stagers
Production: Absurd Person Singular by Alan Ayckbourn
Director: Steffen Zschaler
Date: Friday 22 November 2024
Venue: Grayshott Village Hall

Description of the Production:

Written in 1972 and first performed at the Library Theatre Scarborough, *Absurd Person Singular* has enjoyed popular success both in the UK and on Broadway ever since. Divided into three Acts, with each Act taking place in the kitchen of their separate homes on successive Christmas Eves, it follows the fortunes of three very different married couples.

Over the years their circumstances change drastically: fortunes made, fortunes lost, reputations damaged, relationships strained and breaking down but then being patched up, however tenuously. In the end one couple, the underdogs at the start, trying desperately to ingratiate themselves with their perceived superior neighbours, turn out to have made a success of their rather dreary lives and have the other two couples, who have suffered the reverse, literally ‘dancing to their tune’.

Front of House and Theatre Ambience:

Grayshott Stagers always provide a friendly welcome, a decent raffle, and a suitable bar in the smaller side hall. The main Hall is well proportioned, solidly built in 1902 with a high beamed ceiling and a good-sized stage. The night I was there was a sell-out with an enthusiastic audience who clearly thoroughly enjoyed the show.

The Programme:

The A5 programme provided interesting thumbnail biographies of the performers, some of whom are new to the group. It is good to know that there is no shortage of talented amateurs willing to join local theatre groups, bringing new faces and abilities to our village stages.

In his Director’s Note Steffen Zschaler, also directing his first production for Grayshott Stagers, described Alan Ayckbourn as “one of the masters of observational comedy in theatre” and the storyline in this play rings true even now, 50 years after it was first written.

Scenery/Set/Props:

The play takes place in three different kitchens, each one fitted out to reflect the circumstances of the owners. The appliances were authentic and matched the lifestyle of the owners, in Act 1 down to the packet of Dreft and the old-fashioned Fairy Liquid bottle. And the wall cabinet with the sliding glass doors brought back a few memories! Subtle changes were made to the placing of the furniture and the use of the doors and window. If I have one criticism, it is that a different set of curtains could have been used for each kitchen, rather than the same ones throughout, particularly as Marion Brewster-Wright (Brezetta Thonger) made a point of admiring them in Act 1 which she clearly didn’t mean!

Lighting and sound:

Lighting was unobtrusive and appropriate. Sound effects, such as the sound of rain every time the back door was opened, the barking dog, and voices from the sitting room, added to the atmosphere.

Costumes:

Costumes were well chosen and just right, ranging from the mundane to the sloppy to the shabby-glamorous!

The Production:

The play opens in the first kitchen belonging to Jane and Sidney Hopcroft (Jemma Jessup and Paul Baverstock). Sidney is an up-and-coming builder, keen to impress who he thinks are his social superiors. As the years go by, he becomes wealthier and more successful, overtaking them on the social ladder but retaining his rather rough exterior. He comes across as a bully, controlling his wife Jane who I felt was the most sympathetic character in the play. Although not very bright, she is eager to please and friendly. She is obsessed by cleaning and proud of her 'modern' kitchen appliances, particularly the washing machine. One of the funniest lines, in true Ayckbourn style, came from Marion who, feigning interest in the washing machine, remarked "Whites and coloureds. My God, it's apartheid"! Jane is happiest when doing the housework but appears to live in a world of her own, unaware of the feelings or the circumstances of those around her. The nervous tension generated by the two of them while they wait for their guests to arrive was palpable and the ensuing events when Jane goes in search of tonic water in the pouring rain were very funny and slick.

Move to Eva (Annie Bartholomew) and Geoffrey (Richard Hosmer) Jackson's kitchen a year later in Act 2. Geoffrey, a reasonably successful architect, is another bully, haranguing his depressed and suicidal wife, who is on anti-depressants, threatening to leave her until she recovers. The Hopcrofts arrive, clearly now enjoying new-found success which Geoffrey resents, followed by Marion (Brezetta Thonger) and Ronald (Eric Collins) Brewster-Wright. Chaos ensues. Eva grabs a knife and attempts to kill herself. Geoffrey leaves to find a doctor. Eva, who never speaks a word throughout the Act, is looked after by the others who try to fix various things around the kitchen – blocked sink, dodgy light, dirty oven (Jane in her element here) – while she tries various fruitless means of committing suicide, only being rescued at the last minute each time by one of her friends who fail to notice what is going on. Rumbling in the background is the sound of the Jackson's ferocious barking dog who has apparently bitten Dick Potter - heard but never seen with his wife Lottie.

Finally, to Act 3 and the Brewster-Wright's up-market but deteriorating kitchen. Marion spends most of her time in bed, having taken to the bottle big-time. Ronald, a Bank Manager, is struggling to make a living and can hardly afford to heat the house. Enter Eva and Geoffrey, who has been out of work since the collapse of a shopping complex he designed. By contrast, Eva has fully recovered and more or less takes charge, running up and down stairs to check on Marion. Marion staggers down, clutching a bottle. Sidney and Jane appear at the back door which has been left unlocked but the others don't want to see them, so they switch off the lights and attempt to hide. Oblivious to the fact that they are not welcome, Sidney and Jane let themselves in. Sidney tries to cheer up the party, insisting they play a game involving dancing and forfeits. The others are forced to join in, humiliated, but knowing that they all need Sidney and Marion whose success has now given them the upper hand.

The play brilliantly reveals the pressures of the festive season (which will soon be upon us!), supposed to be among the most stressful experiences in life alongside moving house and divorce!

Congratulations to Steffen Zschaler on his directorial debut for The Stagers. The eight main characters were well cast, each one bringing out their particular characteristics very believably. The pace dropped a little half way through but the hilarious finale more than made up for it, leaving the audience revelling in every excruciating, humiliating, turn. A most enjoyable evening's entertainment.

Jane Turner
Assistant NODA Rep