

Networking

Network Theatre Company's Newsletter

January 2011

Dear Networkers,

Welcome to the January newsletter, the first one in 2011 so we'd like to take this opportunity to wish you, a bit late, all the best for this New Year.

In this issue, we have reviews of Network's previous productions - Blithe Spirit and the Adventures of the Blue Carbuncle, but we're also looking towards the future and our next production with an interview with Nigel Williams, director of Revenge of the Amazons with performances in March.

Plays for 2011 have been confirmed and you will find the details at the end of this newsletter.

We hope with the breadth of productions and the mix of classical, modern and new writing, you will find one that appeals to you.

All the best and good luck for your next audition!

Rosie de Vekey & Gaelle Comte
Editors

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Review of *Blithe Spirit*, directed by Emily Godowski

By Emily Carmichael

Whether you're a fan of his work or not, it's difficult to go wrong with a Noel Coward production. One of Britain's most successful playwrights of the 20th century, he delivered countless beautifully written, exquisitely characterised pieces of work. He mastered both comedy and tragedy with seeming effortlessness and his work has a timelessness which demand to be taken to the stage again and again. A prime example of this is *Blithe Spirit* - part supernatural fantasy, part romantic comedy steeped in cynicism.

The story begins with Charles Condomine, an English village-based novelist, hosting a seance with his second wife, Ruth and the event itself led by the secret laughing stock that is supposed medium Madame Arcati. But when she accidentally conjures up the spirit of Charles' first wife, Elvira, he finds his comfortable life greatly inconvenienced by her return and his marriage to Ruth under strain. Coward wrote the play - he claimed in five days - in 1941 and wanted it performed as an "escapism" from the horrors of World War II. After initial outcry that the play "made fun of death", it became a huge success, running for a record 1,997 consecutive performances in the West End.

This adaptation at Network, directed by Emily Godowski, is a real love letter to those times of good-old fashioned wit and farce, whilst at the same time not falling prey to nostalgic cliches. This is delivered through the impressively three-dimensional performances.

Julian Farrance as Charles avoids playing the central role as a carefree gent who throws away the

lines as though they were used tissues (no disrespect to Rex Harrison in the film version). Instead, he conveys both charm with his razor-sharp observations and a twitchy vulnerability when Elvira comes back into his life, effectively showing a man confused by a love he thought he'd lost. His interactions with both wives made for completely joyful viewing, not least because of the fantastic performances of the women themselves.



Photograph by Paul H Lunnon

Network newcomer Laura Courtney elevates Ruth from being the constantly nagging spouse and shines in her outraged speeches, making her character a feisty force to be reckoned with. Her energy brought to the production is alive even in the rare moments she isn't speaking, with the dubious raise of an eyebrow and a concerned narrowing of the eyes.

And the glorious Zoe Hart as Elvira - a vision in a flowing white gown and a truly ghostly, somewhat sparkly, pallor on stage - is pitch

perfect as she delivers a mixture of playful mischief, wide-eyed melancholy and also a furious wit in her laugh-out-loud argument with Charles in the second act. Elvira's presence is much talked about by the characters and much awaited for by the audience and Hart does that anticipation complete justice when she finally arrives on stage.

One of Coward's trademarks in his works was the use of eccentric supporting characters and Godowski's production contains scene-stealing turns from the following: Sacha Walker as Madame Arcati, whose mix of childlike excitement and knowing sense of humour make for a more grounded portrayal of the famously dotty character, whilst still paying respect to her delightful quirkiness; Andy Bradshaw and Laura Bosco (another Network newcomer) as the Bradmans, have brief but hilarious stage time with their yuppie cynicism and slight bickering painted over by toothy, neighbourly grin. Even in the case of maid Edith, the utterly, inside-out splendid Kay Murray does not fall into the trap of playing her as mousy bit-part stock. Instead, she enchants the audience whenever she's on stage, with her delicately clumsy physical comedy and particularly with the twist she provides towards the end. It says a lot about an actor when they are able to induce fits of helpless giggling amongst the crowd with just a few words and a sweetly spacey singing voice.

The words, no doubt, are the best thing about this and any other Coward play, but this particular production of *Blithe Spirit* cannot

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be discussed without paying highly respectful tribute to its aesthetics.

The entire action of the play being set in one room never becomes dull, as it becomes something of a 1940s visual feast: the decor is tasteful, not too fussy and noticeably rather blue (no doubt there's a reason for that) and mostly brightly lit as perfect complement to the sparky dialogue - until the seance sequences, where everything is plunged into truly spooky, blindingly blue (of course) spotlight. These moments, especially the first time it happens, are genuinely exciting and skilfully played out with the wide-eyed rapture of Madame Arcati and the whispered squeals of the other guests. Yes, this may be a comedy of the sexes artfully arguing about

the nature of marriage, but don't forget, this is also a ghost story - of sorts - and time spent on these supernatural sequences are much appreciated and enjoyed.

Admiration must also be expressed for the costumes, especially considering they were provided by the cast members themselves. From Courtney's stylish collection of elegant yet freshly unpretentious ensembles to *that* beautiful ivory gown worn by Hart (for the entire play, no less) the clothing gives a luxe kick to the simple set. It is a further reminder of how chic that bypassed era was...cue the nostalgic sighs.

Finally, and most importantly, the onstage trickery. It is not overused

and is a fine example of the dictum "less is more" because when it is employed, it is truly impressive. The play ending with Charles' monologue to his dead wives (have they/haven't they truly gone back to their spiritual plain?) and getting response from various moving furniture and opening of doors certainly caused a few delighted gasps within the audience, as though watching a genuine magic show. Therefore, honourable mention must go to stage manager David Harvey and his fantastic team for ending the production with such a gloriously executed and mysterious wink to the audience. In terms of a satisfactory wrapping up to this overall polished, endearing and loving tribute to a national institution of a man - well, one couldn't ask for more, really.



Photograph by Paul H Lunnon

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Interview with Nigel Williams, Director of *Revenge of the Amazons*

By Rosie de Vekey

Tell us about *Revenge of the Amazons*

Jean Betts the author has said she wrote the play "mostly to provide more comic parts for women, and a better share of the famous lines". She felt a bit fed up that Shakespeare's plays are overwhelmingly bloke-ridden. The audience will see characters they recognise doing things they do not expect

How is it different to *A Midsummer Nights Dream*?

The basic plot is the same; Theseus is about to marry Hippolyta, the young lovers fall asleep in the forest, there are fairies including Oberon and Titania, Puck gets up to mischief, confusion reigns. The most obvious difference from the Shakespeare is the absence of the Mechanicals. Bottom and the rest are replaced by the Fallopian Thespians, a group of women with varying degrees of commitment to the cause of feminism, determined to persuade Hippolyta not to marry. I don't want to give to give too much away.

How will the show compare to the Network production of the Dream in 2009?

Nothing could compare to that production - and I mean that in the most complimentary way possible. What Andy Bradshaw achieved was extraordinary. The clarity of the story combining with the rock music and the choreography kept one 10 year child gripped from start to finish. There aren't many productions of Shakespeare that do that. Will *Revenge of the Amazons* engross a 10 year old? I hope we will never find out because if you are under 15 you probably should not be in the audience.

What are the challenges of the show?

To date the biggest challenge has been rehearsing on a stage full of another company's set. I know we are very lucky, if not spoilt, at Network to rehearse on the stage on which we will perform but to be encumbered by rostra for a whole month is proving difficult. These practical difficulties aside, the challenge of the play is to blend the legend of Theseus, Hippolyta and the court with a bunch of very contemporary women and then add fairies to the mix. The switch from the language and setting of Shakespeare to that of the modern day is not an easy one. Another challenge that I face almost every day is

trying to find out why the hell yours truly is directing an overtly feminist drama.



How are rehearsals going?

So far so good. We started with two evenings simply going through the script and getting to know one another. With a cast of twenty one, company spirit is essential. There is a lot to do in a short space of time but I think I have assembled a cast more than capable of pulling it off. Some people are surprised by my choice of role for them but as I keep saying, this is not Shakespeare - well not all of it anyway.

Who are your cast?

The words of Pete Seeger came to mind during the auditions but we got there in the end. I could give you a long list but then no one would buy the programme. In this large cast there are twelve making their debut in a Network stage production so that's nine familiar faces:

Emma Byrne, Moira Cane, Hannah Few, Irene Fumagalli, Suzy de Lezameta, Janice Okoh, Paul D'Orley, Sue Small and Lesley Winterflood.

Is there anything you need help with? (Prop requests etc)

At the moment everything seems to be under control but I reserve the right to change my mind and scream for help. I have been able to put together a great crew with Paul Lunnon designing the set, Dan Young lighting it and Gail Caplin looking after costume. The Assistant Director is Jordana Berk, a newcomer to Network who wants to direct in the future - what a way to start but her young female help is much appreciated by this antiquated male.

What can we expect from the show?

A fun night out without too much mental anguish!

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Review of *The Adventures of the Blue Carbuncle*, directed by Emma Byrnes By Rosie de Vekey

In a departure from Network's usual theatrical offerings, here was the world premiere on 10 December of a new audioplay adaptation by Emma Byrne, based on Arthur Conan Doyle's most festive Sherlock Holmes mystery.

Gathering together a live audience for an audioplay is a brave thing to do, but there have been notable successes in recent times, such as the Fitzrovia Radio Hour that has long been entertaining London audiences. Network's intimate setting lends itself well to such an enterprise and the stage was well utilised, understatedly divided into three 'spaces' - the living room of 221b Baker Street, an outside street scene and a courtroom - with each spotlighted at the appropriate moments in the story. It was highly atmospheric and ensured it was not only the

audience's ears that were given a workout.

Emma, whose adaptation spearheads Network's first foray into podcasting, undoubtedly has a genuine passion for the Holmes stories and it came out in the script. It was largely faithful to the original, save for some nicely worked development of Mrs Hudson's character and some suitable gender reassignment elsewhere to cater for the bias in her cast. Full of affection, at 27 minutes long, it was also crisp, to the point and speckled with humour too.

Nigel Williams and Sean McMullan made a fine Holmes and Watson and Sue Small a feisty Ma Breckenridge. But the secret of the production's success was in the strength of the ensemble work.



Photograph by Paul H Lunnon

Although some of the roles were small, all made their contribution to the creation of atmosphere. Cathy Neeson, David Harvey and Paul D'Orly pulled off some production wizardry to give the finished piece a real sense of professionalism. So here was an act of bravery that more than paid off, and hopefully marks the start of a series of Network audioplays, ideal for new writers (and indeed actors) to cut their teeth on.

A Blithe Spirit and a Blue Carbuncle disc are available from Paul H Lunnon [p.lunnon@dsl.pipex.com] and include a complete photographic record of the production in a free flow of pictures set to music as well as a recording of the audioplay for Blue Carbuncle. The Blue Carbuncle recording can also be downloaded for free from our website at www.networktheatre.org/shows/Pages/Blue.aspx.

COMING UP IN 2011

Revenge of the Amazons - performances from 2 to 5 March

Road - performances from 13 to 16 April

Romeo and Juliet - reading on 22 March, auditions on 29 & 30 March, performances from 29 June to 2 July and 5 to 8 July

There's more to come so watch this space or visit www.networktheatre.org

All submissions are welcome. Please send to the editor at news@networktheatre.org.

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For all the latest information go to www.networktheatre.org

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