

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

FULL-LENGTH PLAY FESTIVAL 2019-2020

Group: LADS

Production: Gaslight by Patrick Hamilton

Date of Adjudication: Friday November 22

Adjudicator: Liz Mullen

INTRODUCTION:

This play has become more relevant as the years have passed. The term “Gaslighting”, for psychological abuse, has entered our language.

Not having seen this play for a few years, I was looking forward to Richard Lang’s production for LADS - and to appreciating how things have changed so little for those unfortunate enough to be trapped in relationships of this kind. In 1890, women were understood to be under the control of their husbands in any case, so it must have been even easier for a man to persuade his wife that she was losing her mind, in order to cover up his nefarious deeds.

FRONT OF HOUSE:

Always a warm and friendly welcome, with swift wafting into the “armchair row” and offers of refreshment. The venue really is a barn of a place, but the now-legendary heaters do a great job to ward off the winter chills.

A young boy and girl in period costume were stationed in the foyer, selling programmes – a nice touch.

I do find that the rear stalls, so to speak, although very comfy, are a long way from the stage when it comes to volume. Most actors in this play projected well but there were times when I strained slightly to hear the higher, female voices.

I must also mention my thanks for the front-of-front-of-house (parking steward) who ensured we didn’t park in a rut or a boggy bit. Thank you!

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SETTING:

All the action takes place in the late-19th Century drawing room of Mr and Mrs Manningham.

Nobody talked about minimalism in those days, so the walls and shelves were suitably cluttered (tastefully, of course) with plenty of period paraphernalia. The deep red colour of the walls below the picture rail and the green shade above it – complete with rows of decorative china plates – looked right, as did the choice of furniture and furnishings.

We had the drapes, a hat stand, a bureau, a bell pull, a table with its chenille cover, the inevitable potted plant, paintings etc, a crimson chaise longue and armchair with lace antimacassars and some very believable gas lamps which worked obediently. The well-designed fireplace contained a warm glow.

Stage left there was a clever cutaway wall which enabled us to see the reactions of anyone arriving outside the room, or leaving it. This hallway had also been dressed authentically.

LIGHTING AND SOUND:

No complaints with the technical aspects....everything helped to add up to a mood of expectation and a sense of period.

The gas lamps are so crucial, and they dipped and rose when Manningham was searching in the adjoining property and depleting the limited gas supply. The lighting in the room was appropriate for the time of day.

COSTUME:

Very good. Mrs Manningham's gown, a good class of dress but a comfortable version for relaxing at home, was a lovely pale peachy shade (or so it looked under the lights) and Mr M was very smartly and properly dressed – a handsome blaggard indeed. The housekeeper and maid were also correctly attired and the bluff intruder (retired detective Rough) was clad in a suit which could probably be described as louder.

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PERFORMANCES:

MRS MANNINGHAM: Maddie Butler struck the right note from the start. Still pretty but increasingly delicate, bullied by her husband and confused by his insinuations, this was certainly a character to pity and to cheer silently for. Maddie made it clear that there was still a bit of spirit left inside Bella, despite her increasingly anguished situation. The climactic scene with the lost bill and the (or rather without the) dog, was full of nervous tension. Her final victorious revenge was delicious.

MR MANNINGHAM: Looking perfect for the role as the dashing but dastardly husband, Matthew Bacon gave a superbly cold performance of a gentleman with few gentlemanly qualities. Matthew's treatment of all those "beneath" him was manipulative and chilling. The bill/dog scene mentioned in the paragraph above was tightly-paced.

ROUGH: I enjoyed Charlie Potter's shrewd and warm-hearted performance as the retired detective with unfinished business. I would have liked a little bit less cockney-style bonhomie, personally, and a more gruff dignity, but it was an energetic and sympathetic performance, which embodied plenty of suspense.

ELIZABETH: This is a lovely role. Kath Lang tackled it with a homely kindness, tempered with cautious obedience and patience in the face of her master's obvious cruelty. Her role in the scene where Rough seems likely to be flushed from his hiding place, is important, and you could feel her almost hearty-stopping tension.

NANCY: The flirtatious maid with designs on her employer is also a great role, this time for a younger actress. Emily Tickner judged it well, never overdoing it with too many doe-eyed looks. I loved her little moment back out in the hallway...after being creepily complimented by her master (in front of his humiliated wife), Emily preened briefly with satisfaction, patting her hair in the mirror. After their eventual embrace, Emily portrayed well Nancy's misguided growing confidence.

POLICE OFFICER: A little cameo, but none the less important, performed effectively by Buster Tickner.

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DIRECTION:

Richard Lang had cast his production well and had given thought to the actors' movements around the sturdy furnishings.

The play is a strong one, but rather lengthy. In general, the pace and build-up were good, but as the evening continued, there were moments – especially around the bureau - when time seemed to be moving rather slowly. Curtain-up had been delayed by ten minutes, so the result was a longer than lengthy evening for those of us who travel a fair distance. Possibly a few more lines could have been cut without damage.

However, generally, the skills of the lead performers ramped up the fear factor. As an audience, we rooted hard for Manningham to get his come-uppance and we got our reward, as did Bella.

SUMMARY:

In less talented hands, Gaslight could be a tawdry disappointment, but the cast and director gave this production dignity, fear and humanity in a gripping storyline.

Thank you very much for keeping me on the edge of my (arm)chair.

Best wishes

Liz Mullen (adjudicator)