

Gaslight by Patrick Hamilton

Latchingdon Arts & Drama Society

The Tractor Shed 22/11/19

Gaslight set in the late Victorian era, is written by tragic playwright and novelist Patrick Hamilton, it still holds an important message which in 2019 seems even more relevant than ever. The play coined the term 'gaslighting' – a method of mental abuse in which information is perverted or false information is offered with the intent of making the victim distrust their own memory, perception, or sanity

This Victorian thriller, set in 1880's London, was made into a British movie in 1940 and then again in 1944 starring Ingrid Bergman. The author used the play to express his concern about the way some husbands waged a systematic war of mental abuse against their wives.

Gaslight revolves around Bella Manningham who is slowly being driven insane by her husband Jack. He implies that she has inherited her own mother's madness and accuses her of losing pictures, jewellery, bills etc., until she begins to believe that it is all true. He openly flirts with Nancy, the maid and it's only when help arrives in the form of a retired police inspector that she finds the courage to gain revenge for all the suffering Jack has caused her.

Maddie Butler as Bella Manningham gave us a beautiful characterisation of the role. She created an atmosphere of neglect and a rollercoaster of emotions. She was entirely believable and had us rooting for her from the beginning. Hard work during rehearsals on her role was obvious as she seemed to totally understand the woman that she played. Her end speech was terrifically acted and I wanted to cheer for her at the end.

Matthew Bacon was the evil Jack Manningham or should we say Sidney Powers! He played the cruel, manipulative master of the house, with a cold calculating manner and a malicious malevolence; he interacted well with everyone on stage giving clear projection and dominance. He showed us an extreme level of control and exploitation, but perhaps a little more swagger about him, as he went about his plans, to emphasise that he had previously got away with murder and possibly a little more sexual chemistry between himself and Nancy would have enhanced his performance.

Charlie Potter was retired Police Inspector Rough. Confident on stage he showed kindness and almost paternal concern to Bella, finally bringing Jack to justice. Charlie was a larger than life policeman with plenty of charisma, while his comedy moments brought laughter from the audience. A total contrast in speech to the upper class Jack, he kept his London accent up and was totally in control of the whole sequence of events. I might have liked to have seen a little less pacing on stage but that was probably a directorial decision.

Elizabeth the Housekeeper was ably acted by Kath Lang. This was a delightful, quiet understated performance, she looked comfortable and at ease with her role.

Nancy (Emily Tickner) was the cheeky, flirtatious maid, with an eye on the main chance of seducing Jack to become her lover and hopefully her provider. She showed us clearly she had no sympathy for her mistress, going out of her way to undermine her at every opportunity.

Buster Tickner came on at the end as the Police Officer with another unnamed character to arrest Jack.

The direction for this play was provided by directors Richard Lang and his assistant Heather Bainbridge, who both did a brilliant job in their debut. I felt that they understood the play and what was needed to bring the characters to life. Just a little point if I'm being picky, the maids would during that time period, always do a little bob or curtsy when entering the room, and they sometimes forgot to knock at the door before entering. Full marks though to Kath as Elizabeth who saw that the bureau that is supposed to be always locked had been left open and quickly closed it at the beginning of the play.

The set was beautifully designed and presented with every Victorian piece of dark furniture and prop that you could wish for. Congratulations to all the set design and props team, you really did a splendid job. Having directed this play myself I know just how hard it is to find the right period furniture but this was a really exceptional feast for the eyes. Costumes by wardrobe mistress Sharyn Hughes were excellent and totally correct for the period, as were makeup and hair.

The lighting was well plotted, with a lovely fire burning in the grate which added to the atmosphere and the fog in the window worked well. There was a small problem stage right, where there was a lack of light, so that sometimes actor's faces were in shadow. Also when the gaslights went down, which is always an important effect in

this show, the lights in the hallway stayed up, which somewhat ruined the effect of this claustrophobic scene. A shame as this effect always makes my spine tingle when I see it done. Good precision cuing for the dimming and brightening of the lamps. Sound was fine with good use of music at the beginning.

Front of house staff were wonderful giving us a very warm welcome on such a cold night. Last but no means least the little dog brought on in the end at the curtain call was a pure genius.

This was an excellent production with a lot of thought and dedication to the performances. It was my first time seeing a play at this society, I had previously come to see the musical revue where I thought then how friendly and professional this society was, once again this was confirmed tonight.

I really do look forward to seeing more of your productions and hopefully at some point welcoming you all to NODA.

Christine Davidson