

Full Report

Date

12th September 2019

Society

Southwick Players

Venue

The Barn Theatre, Southwick

Type of Production

Play

Director

Harry Atkinson

Report

In a brief overview, Dinner is a black comedy by playwright Moria Buffini. The plot is simple. We are witness to a dinner party hosted by Paige; to celebrate the publication of her husband Lars' book on Philosophy. The guests are a scientist, his 'sexpot' newsreader wife, a vegetarian artist and an unexpected guest in the form of a van driver/burglar who has crashed his van into a ditch outside their house. The menu consists of a starter of Primordial soup, a main of live lobster (and a frozen cabbage), where the guests have to choose between releasing them into the pond or cooking them and to top it off, Frozen Waste as the desert. Her guests, including Lars, are all people she despises and the story is of her exposing the hidden truths of all of them. Assisted by a near silent waiter whom she has hired from the internet, there are twists and turns galore. The script is generally well written. The language, meant to reflect "real life" did seem unnecessarily excessive in places and despite being forewarned, in my opinion, certain swear words were overused and lost some impact. That said, it is a good piece of theatre with well rounded characters and a good twist at the end.

Performed in the round, Harry Atkinson's direction was clever allowing a natural feel to observing a dining room. There were long periods, where the guests were sitting at the table, where their back were inevitably to the audience. This was countered cleverly by "reversing" the table in the interval so each side of the audience effectively got an act each of the guests.

Martin Oakley's set was a simple, but elegant, dinner table with 6 chairs, three man entrances and exits and not much else. Not that it was needed. Jeff Woodford's lighting was subtle but well suited to the mood of the piece, becoming slightly dark and dingier as the production came to a close, and his sound design was well rounded with each character able to be heard at all times. Mills Hills' costumes were well suited to the guests and Alison Atkinson, Jo Hall and Jo Clarke are to be commended on their excellent properties.

This script was unknown to me before I attended but, on reflection, it was clear it needed a competent and able cast to carry it off. Given the time that everyone is on stage, and allowing their characters to become more and more intoxicated as the evening progresses was testament to an exceptional cast. Playing drunk is a notoriously difficult feat for an actor but all pulled it off convincingly and the tension as the dinner went on became palatable.

Jacqueline Harper played Paige to perfection. From her first lines, you knew she was a nasty piece of work and this exacerbated with her increasingly frequent requests for “more drinks”. She was the epitome of a depressed wife, determined to bring everyone else down. By the end, I truly felt sorry for her. Her long suffering husband Lars, played excellently by Philip Keane, had true depth to his performance. Starting light and jovial but with tension between him and his wife, he descends into a haggard and beaten man. For an actor who “hasn’t acted in anything proper before” as his programme notes suggest, there was no evidence of this and he is a true natural talent. Adam MacRae as microbiologist Hal was genial and comical throughout, trying to play pacemaker alongside Wynne (Jenny Burternshaw), the vegetarian artist who was sneakily, then less so, revealing her true feelings for Lars. Jenny played the part superbly. Her aghast at the lobster main was brilliant. Seemingly airheaded but kind, she was the perfect opposite to Sian (Louise Yeo). Louise gave a brilliant portrayal of bitchiness through body language and facial expression, but the highlight of her character for me was her two minute speech on murder weapons. Neil Turk played Mike, the unexpected guest. His character was excellent, leading you to believe he was a renown thief and criminal but, like most things in this script, all was not as it seemed. He exceptionally played the part of someone in over his head before realising he was actually the only genuine one in the room. Lately, and by no means least, H Reeves played the near silent waiter with menace and reverence. Performing with just facial expressions and body language is true talent. His subservience to Paige and Paige alone was creepily loyal and his involvement in the final events, whilst not entirely unpredicted, still delivered the intended shocking impact.

It is a brave choice for any company given the language and the themes throughout however, this was an excellent production.