

Abandonment 2009

The choice of Kate Atkinson's "Abandonment" was a bold one from the outset. Some of our group may have felt it was even beyond our capabilities for a wide variety of reasons: It is a modern play with modern themes and modern language. The dual time zones would be a challenge to stage. The cast would need to be up to the challenge of a fast moving script. All their fears were allayed in Andy Armstrong's directorial debut.

One could have been justly surprised at how well the end result was given the age and inexperience of the director. Clearly Andy is far from just a successful actor. Professional classes may well have played some part in this.

It is always good to be able to use local playwrights and using a well respected York playwright and novelist was pleasing.

Our audience may have been somewhat put off by the lengthy list, in the programme, of scene changes in Act 2, but a fast moving script kept the pace brisk. However, I do feel that once an audience has sat beyond 10pm you have lost the best part of them. The play did seem a little too long. The only way I could see that this could have been significantly reduced was to use more stage managers and to cut down on the time to change between certain scenes, but this too presents its own difficulties. Friargate Theatre presents its own challenges in this department.

The set was excellent and it was the little details that made it so good: the clock, the colours and the furniture. Well done to the producer, set designers & constructors and all stage hands. The end result gave the perfect backdrop to the actors.

The play flew by and this to me is always the sign of a great play. I thoroughly enjoyed the show and thought it an excellent choice for DDS. It was great to have a play that was so very different to anything that we had recently performed. That itself brought many challenges to the group. I was sorry not to be able to be a part of the show myself. Despite have a large cast and heavily weighted towards the females I gather that some members didn't get the part that they auditioned for. That is sad, but a fact of life. The casting here worked.

Recruiting Andy Wilby was a great idea. A new face and voice is always a bonus. His portrayal of Callum was super. – Very convincing. He was bold, convincing, and rough round the edges and very human. And no I don't want to see a photo of his "son" Finn! I do hope that he can be persuaded to work with us again.

Casting Jo Harris as Agnes the governess was a bold leap of faith. Jo had very little previous acting experience. Her sensitive portrayal of a woman in love: a woman scorned was convincing. Her first soliloquy was so poignant. It took a lot of practice and understanding of the words. It was commanding. Atkinson's idea of the ghost being present in Elizabeth's house, but visible to none was a great way to bring the two stories together. A process that developed as the plot went on and wove the two stories closer and closer together until Agnes was discovered, her story heard at last and she was set free.

The main character study centres on the sisters Elizabeth and Kitty and Elizabeth's friend Susie, ably acted by Marie Butler, Christine Gajewicz and Lisa Valentine. Here Andy recognised the need to have three experienced actors to be able to convey the complex and strong characters. As ever Marie was word perfect and brought Elizabeth's character to life. We felt her lows and highs; her disappointments and betrayals. This was another great performance by one of our strongest female leads. Christine surprised me with her first entrance – it was the wig...well the wig and the heels! The idea of changing Christine to make her look younger and a tart worked. However, she seemed to constantly be fighting with the heels. This was a great idea from the wardrobe mistress Jill (Keeping it in the family!), but probably not the most practical. None of this detracted from a very real portrayal of a troubled young lady. Not at ease in her own skin so convinced that "something terrible had happened to her". These two females worked so well together; their characters so convincing. They were the perfect foils. One could hardly believe that they were indeed sisters – easy to accept then that the story unfolds to let us know that they were only adoptive sisters. Christine gave us a great performance, strong commanding, convincing. Most women in the audience must have hated her by the end of the show; never happy with any one of her conquests and not above wrecking the relationship of the others around her.

Lisa must have enjoyed playing a part different to others that she has played in the past. Susie was a strong and fiery character. Her wig helped portray this dynamic side to her. I know that Lisa has never been keen to wear a wig and this should now convince her that with the right role it can make a real difference to one's performance.. The cannabis use and the desire to get pregnant were well performed giving Elizabeth the lesbian friend that you can always call on for a drink. Lisa seemed relaxed and happy with the role that she had developed for this part. We really felt her heartache and disappointments. This was a challenge for Lisa and she pulled it off well. She role enhanced the relationship between the other leading female actors. Again Kate Atkinson makes us really analyse our own feelings and the impact that our actions has on others around us.

These two characters are held together in the bond that is their "Mother", Ina – not surprising that Kitty can never bring herself to mention her name. This was a great part for Janet Parkinson, but a challenge to learn all the lines and fit it together with the sentiments, and emotions behind it. I know that Janet really enjoys having a part that she can get her teeth into. Her venom was felt by all of us in the audience. Her denial, her coldness towards her daughter her despair at all that she had never had.

There was very little scope for the men in the group with this show, but Ian Lawson did us proud. His portrayal of both Merric and Alec was a triumph. In particular the scene in which he moved from one age to another by merely a turn of his head. It was clearly a difficult scene to construct and put together and must have been easier for Jo and Marie, but Ian was literally piggy in the middle. The move towards this scene was very subtle and again Atkinson thinks through her characters development; his entry into Elizabeth's house with both cameras and a costume that would transcend both ages in time. Very clever Jill!

Rachel leaves us soon to go to Reading University and I hope that she will continue her interest in theatre and acting. Gertie was not exactly a part that you can get your teeth into, but is integral to the plot none the less. She gave a very convincing speech to Agnes when telling her of the truths behind her relationship with the master and what she should do with her unborn child. I hope that she enjoyed the part.

It was great to see Barbara back treading the boards! This was definitely a real family affair – sorry that your names were not all 100% correct in the programme. This was a great part, a real gem - and Barbara played it well. She is such a great contrast to her son Merric who cannot see or accept when a real chance for love is in front of him. She gave a convincing performance of a woman who had known real love and had been willing to suffer for it.

Vicky stole the show at every entrance – that dress was a real find Jill! The colour, the design was so different for all the others. It gave a real lift to the drabness of the Victorian set. What a great idea. It also gave the necessary illusion of the ages of Merric and Laetitia being compatible. This is a perennial problem of drama groups to get suitable actors, of suitable ages to play opposite each other. Again a triumph of wigs by Eileen, it just fitted the part and the age of the character. Eileen had her work cut out in this show with so many wigs to look after and fit each night. Well done! I know how much they can make a difference to giving a character life. The Reverend Scobie was a relatively incident role in the play, but gave us a glimpse of Laetitia's desperation to contact her long lost son. It was well played by Phil and assisted the audience to feel Laetitia's overwhelming feelings at the constant betrayal of her husband and finally the fact that he could become a father again after she had so tragically lost her own son. It was so unbearable that she had to protect her family and their name by getting rid of Agnes once and for all. All the audience were totally unprepared for what unfolded. The gaps were very real!

The show was lit well and the music set the scene suitably well. Well done to Maria and Ken. Trish as always keeps the show moving along seamlessly and runs the whole production with her usual calmness and integrity.

Fortunately Jill had very little to do on the book, but I would like to have seen (Or should I say heard) less prompts. Actors cannot simply learn the lines, they've got to know the characters inside out and be able to get around difficulties if they occur.

Andy's design for the poster, flyers and programme was extremely professional. The idea of branding across the three products worked and gave the whole production a professional feel. The design of the images on the cover was both clever and thought provoking. It gave the audience an insight to what the play was about. Promoting at our previous event (The Murder Mystery evening at St. Olave's) was also a clever marketing opportunity. It did indeed bring in a new audience.

Abandonment was different, interesting and a real triumph for all concerned. It was a wise and bold choice.

Sally-Jane Fell May 2009