

MURDER WEEKEND

By Bettine Mantelow

October 2009

This modern play was a great mixture of suspense and comedy. It is well written. The characters are well defined and the dialogue gives the actors a real chance to develop their own roles. What I liked was the dual plot that evolved as the play unfolded: the story of the couples arriving for a hotel's murder weekend and the more sinister story that unravels at the end of the play. By the end the quirky asides and comments made by Wallace Wainwright finally make sense. He had some great on liners! The choice of play was a good one. There were enough characters for our group to be given a chance to act, there was a variety of ages and a good male:female ratio. However, I gather that Andy had some difficulty in recruiting a third man and had to end up both directing and acting in this play. This is a situation that we would all like to avoid in the future.

The play ran very smoothly and all credit to Trish and her team. Setting the stage between acts was so seamless and quick. Indeed with Marie having one extremely quick change that the audience were left waiting. Sound was clever and the choice of incidental music inspired. Well done Maria. Lighting was spot on and really set the scene. A good job done by Ken and Co. The set was clever, but simple. I would hope the choice of green was by design rather than that we are governed to a choice of colour according to which paint we have in stock. We wouldn't want to limit our choices. Banana Warehouse came up trumps and Duncan and Co made excellent choices to dress the hotel reception area. The entrance to the garden was so inviting – I'm not surprised that so many of the characters wanted to spend out there. My only disappointment with the set was the gaping expanse of black between the two corners. It looked like a cheap short cut rather than by design and to be minimalist. It almost detracted from the super French doors. I'm not sure of the logic behind it.

Front of house was well coordinated by Janet P – we are so lucky to have a great team that support DDS beyond the actors themselves.

Jill didn't have so much to get her teeth into with this production. Only one hired outfit and then presumably just advice with the other actors outfits. The modern look was a success. There was a good contrast of looks and colours. I felt that one thing that did look out of place were handbags that obviously contained absolutely nothing. They looked so false and this just reminded the audience that they were seeing a play not reality. However, I do know that Jill is not always asked for her advice on these finer details.

Eileen only had a pair of modern wigs to look after, but they really transformed both herself and Christine. It really changed their entire faces and gave life to their characters.

The branding of the posters, flyers and programmes was clever. Andy's design was very professional and set the tone for the production. His cover design was attractive and colourful. He must have spent hours perfecting it. I believe it was time well spent. My only comment would be to have a team of proof-readers on standby before going to print and so allow time to plan well ahead. The creepy font in red was commented on favourably by the audience.

I gather that there were some problems with people getting tickets from the box office at Friargate theatre. I wonder whether this had any impact on the poor audience

numbers for the run of the show. This is a concern as the theatre is very expensive to use. Perhaps we should consider other options?

THE ACTORS

Marie played the part of Livia very well indeed. It was a character that she really played with great aplomb. Her dictation was good and she had spent time learning lines. She knew her character inside out. She was suitably two-faced in her differing relationships both with Stanley and with Ashley. I enjoyed her character and she moved the plot on quickly. The play lifted when she was on stage. She has an on stage presence. My only criticism was her red skirt. The colour was bold, but the style was rather unflattering. Otherwise a great and convincing performance.

Andy was drafted in to play Stanley as another actor was not forthcoming. I don't know how long into rehearsals this was, but his performance didn't suggest a rush to learn lines. He seemed to enjoy his character and was an excellent foil to Livia's unpredictability. He also appeared plausibly vulnerable and gullible. I enjoyed his performance. However, a few lines were a little conversational at times.

Eileen was a convincing hotel owner. She gave a creditable performance and her lines were strongly delivered. We all felt her concern when Shelley disappeared – even when it later transpired that it was part of the plot! She obviously enjoyed playing Mrs Johnson and being a part of the production.

Shelley was not a huge role, but one that Jo played admirably. She learnt her lines and really tried to identify with the character. It is far easier to play an older character than a younger one. Jo was successful here. Her faint at the end of the show was very convincing. Here is an actor who gains so much more from each new role that she takes on. Well done.

Lisa played Patsy to perfection. Her highly strung character and later outbursts were very real indeed. She was the character that we all liked to hate. She was so venomous and backhanded in her comments to Livia – her envy and jealousy shone through. Well done Lisa. Her lines were clear and well delivered – even when she lost the plot. We all felt her anguish and frustration at Ashley's behaviour. A great part to play and clearly well directed. Remember the earlier comment about handbags!

Ian played a very convincing womaniser. The "handsome" journalist and model husband. How well he let the real Ashley unravel as the play developed. Ian wasn't always confident with all his lines and just needs to know them inside out and believe in his performance. We all really enjoyed the character. His wardrobe was spot on.

Christine gave us another excellent performance as the mad "Dotty" Padmore. It was a great comedy role and one that she was really able to get her teeth into and bring to life from the words and directions in the script. We looked forward to her appearances in reception. She was a super foil to her "friend" and companion Vi. She really played the nutty woman to perfection – it all seemed very plausible.

Vi was my first choice of murderer in the murder weekend, or was it the victim? She really was very macabre, especially in her disappointment at the lack of blood on Shelley's apron. Well done Barbara – a great performance. She had clearly listened to direction and really concentrated on her stance and mannerisms. It was a far cry from the Barbara in real life. That's acting. A great choice of outfits – it created the character.

Wallace seemed an odd addition to the murder weekend from his initial appearance. And the deer stalker and coat should have given the audience a glimpse of the mayhem to follow. Initially his character seems very incidental, but as the play progresses so Andy's character developed. I know he was disappointed at his at some of his performances in the final pages of the play. But it was no mean feat! There must have been hours of line learning to be done. The lines were not easy to deliver. He must be assured that his performance worked. We really felt the menace and power that Livia faces when Wallace finally reveals his true identity. What a twist to the play! Very cleverly written and well played out by Marie and Andy. It must have been quite a challenge to direct. The energy really hit the audience.

All in all a good show, but a disappointment that more bodies were not there to enjoy it! Was it timing? With half term starting on the Friday? We do need a show to pull in bums on seats. Murder Weekend will not swell our coffers, but with the very modest budget on props, scenery and costumes we spent a considerable amount less than the last show.

We now need to get out there and all of us sell the murder Mystery in November to friends and family. It needs to be a success to allow us to carry on what we all enjoy doing.