



## ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: **THE KELVIN PLAYERS THEATRE COMPANY**

Name of Production: **'THE FATHER'**

Venue: The Kelvin Studio, Bristol

Date: 15 February 2019

Adjudicator: Gerry Parker

Christopher Hampton has had tremendous success with translations of other authors' work. His use of dialogue in 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses', 'Art' and plays by Ibsen, Moliere and Chekhov is outstanding. He has had less success when writing original stories, his 'White Chameleon', which uses as a basis his own early childhood in Alexandria in the period between the Egyptian revolution and the Suez crisis has little of the sharp observation and biting wit of 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses'.

I make these observations to underline the quality of the writing this play presents. Particularly good is the use Hampton makes of the humour contained in this harrowing observation of a once intelligent man slipping into the world of dementia. I am not a good enough scholar of the French language to compare the humour in this translation to Florian Zeller's original text, but the way in which it breaks the, at times almost unbearable, tension without losing any of the reality within the story is masterly. Without these breaks the play would have been one long downward spiral into dementia and impending death. Fascinating as that might have been to observe it would be asking too much of the players, and to an even greater extent the audience, to keep their concentration focused for the entire evening without an opportunity to relax for a moment or two.

Although Christopher Hampton supplies the tools, the burden of creating a balance between the potential comedy and drama within the story falls heavily on the shoulders of the Director. As they do with any production, standing out front watching the play develop, they are the only ones to see the entire picture and way in which the production is heading. Here we had a Director who had a good feel for the balance required to sustain our interest

in this deep insight into a frightening disease that unfortunately appears to be affecting more and more people in modern times.

Having offered plaudits to the Director for the way in which she handled the delicate balance between drama and comedy and to maintaining a never rushed but goodly pace throughout, I do question occasional passages where I felt actors were allowed to deliver their dialogue without enough variation in tone and speed. Whilst this subject will obviously come up when discussing individual performances, the Director obviously is in the prime position to see how a scene is developing. I concede that my observation may well only apply on the evening I attended and that on other evenings these passages might have played differently.

I would like to have been a 'fly on the wall' when the design of the production was discussed. Having seen your studio theatre used in so many ways I wondered what were the thought lines that led to this very well designed, oblong shape with its emphasis on width rather than depth. A fine choice of furnishings, plus suitable props, helped to establish the different rooms within the flat, and with the assistance of the lighting team this lay out did away with any necessity of striking one set for another. When changes were required to the items on stage, whether they be the removal of small table items or the more important removal of the table, chaise lounge, arm chairs etc, gradually leaving the set bereft of furnishings. A combination of an efficient stage crew and a well drilled cast left me with only one or two minor notes questioning a pause between scenes.

Importantly, clothes fitted the characters they adorned, both the informal and formal nurses' outfits appearing to have just come out of the wardrobe of the actor wearing them. All that adds up to a visual presentation that gave the players a sound base from which to launch their presentation.

I came to this production with strong memories of the 2014 presentation at the Ustinov Theatre in Bath, and went away with new memories, equally deeply etched, of a production that stood on its own two strong feet, paying respect to the Bath presentation, but in no way a mere shadowy copy of that fine production.

## Individual Performances

### **Andre**

A super role that any actor would give his 'eye teeth' to play. With such a role comes enormous responsibilities; if you pitch the changes in the character wrongly, mistiming the decent from slightly irascible, confident, retired man into gradual dementia and finally second childhood, then no matter how well the other members of the cast perform their tasks the play is lost.

I use the term 'mistime' because you have to time your changes in character with the skill of a top class farceur playing comedy if we are to follow this painful decent into mental oblivion. This part of the characterisation you did with great skill, in keeping with tea teetotaller Richard E Grant's portrayal of a drunk in 'Can You Ever Forgive Me?' Your

changes in mental stability were always controlled and expertly judged. Just occasionally we saw a glimpse of the old Andre before you lost control frantically searching for a foothold to keep yourself in today's world.

There were moments, as I mentioned earlier, when more variety in the verbal delivery and physical positioning would have enhanced the presentation. In the case of the verbal delivery I am not talking about long sequences of solo delivery, but sequences when you and other actors picked up each other's pace and tone for too long a period. The physical positioning problem stemmed not from any fault within your performance but from the staging of the production which left you having to work with the audience virtually sitting in your lap. As your expertly created Andre fighting in a manner that made us all want to dash on stage and help him to hold on to reality, the tendency was more and more to lower the eyeline tilting the head carriage forward. With the audience sitting in such close proximity this lost practically all of the facial expression from their view.

These comments are intended to point out minor blips in a finely judged portrayal which from the first scene with its disturbing hints of what was to come with your mental capacity, to the pathetic ending crying for the comfort of your mother was always high class.

## **Anne**

I have always been an admirer of supporting actors, many a poor film or play has been saved for me by an outstanding supporting performance. Now, before you jump high and shout out, quite rightly, that this role can hardly be classed as a supporting role, I would like to say that when a character like that of Andre is about, even one as important as Anne is in this play rather finds itself pushed into the background.

The temptation for the actor concerned in such circumstances is to force themselves forward at every possible moment in order to move out of the shadows. When this happens the balance of power flies out of the window and scenes look and sound lop-sided. Fortunately, here we had an someone who had too many acting skills and far too much experience, to slip into that trap. Having experienced the agony of watching loved ones and close friends slipping inextricably away from me, and the guilt and frustration of being unable to stop their decline, I watched fascinated, like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights, as you brought all these often-destructive emotions vividly to life.

Your handling of the dialogue, having the confidence to hold a pause when necessary was excellent, but even more impressive was your 'off the ball' work. The way in which you responded and reacted in mime to the action taking place around you and dialogue being spoken by others was a delight. I once heard it said that a facial expression shown by Alistair Sim, Margaret Rutherford or Joyce Grenfell was worth several pages of dialogue. Whilst those three legendary figures used such gifts principally to generate comedy you showed that they can be equally effective to illustrate frustration, anger, despair, pain and love.

If you go along the lines that some people read into the character of Anne, believing that she is not so much a concerned loving daughter, that is represented by the missing daughter

Elsie, but a harder headed, hard hearted lady trying to force Andre into a Home to make life easier for herself and partner, then you would say that this portrayal comes up short. I do not subscribe to that view and found this a beautifully balanced finely presented characterisation. The best compliment I can pay you is to say that you reignited in me the acute guilt I felt when first encountering Alzheimer's disease and found myself unable to make contact with someone I had known from childhood into middle age.

### **Women / Laura**

We could spend an inordinate time discussing where the Woman and Laura's character overlap, and come up with several perfectly legitimate interpretations of the two ladies' motives. When are they in the real world and when are they part of the imaginary world that Andre is conjuring up in his disintegrating mind. Just as characters in a farce have to be played completely 'straight' no matter how outrageous the situations they find themselves in or words they have to utter, so these two have a solid base throughout. The audience may be left fishing for where the plot is going but this pair cannot afford to stray from the straight and narrow for a second.

The Woman always had a good practical air about her, her Anne was less sympathetic than the real one. Laura, although a little patronising towards the old and sick, did exude a warmth and kindness which made you feel that anyone left in her charge would always be well cared for.

### **Man / Pierre**

Two men you would not wish to be involved in your care in old age. The Man, because on the surface he is so bland and friendly, is in many ways the more frightening of the pair. When he becomes threatening there is the feeling of real danger in the air.

Pierre came over from the start as a much more selfish being, someone to whom Andre was a nuisance to be dealt with as quickly and callously as possible. There was a nicely drawn difference between the two; your Man for all his bullying gave a hint that he saw the possibility of needing care later in life himself, whereas this firmly structured Pierre had built a high wall around himself that had no chinks in it that could allow doubts about the future to intrude.

Most importantly these two men, as did the Woman and Laura, slipped in and out of the action in a way that ensured that the distinct tone and atmosphere created by the Director was never disrupted; fact or fantasy was always in question.

*Thank you for the much appreciated pre-show cup of tea and biscuits, extra information about the production, and warm welcome. Gerry Parker*