

NAME OF COMPANY:	KELVIN PLAYERS
NAME OF PRODUCTION:	ON GOLDEN POND
VENUE:	Kelvin Players Studio, Bristol
DATE:	Thursday 14 th December 2017
ADJUDICATOR	Caroline Whitehead

A moving performance – up close and personal

Of course, Kelvin Players has a reputation of delivering shows of an excellent standard and so I arrived at the theatre with high expectations. And it is always a joy to come to this little theatre space. It takes great skill in dramatic direction and expert performing ability to create powerful drama in such a small space with no help from a raised stage or a proscenium arch. This is drama at close quarters and that in itself presents challenges. However, I was not disappointed and almost as soon as the story got underway I found myself transported to a little house in Maine and into the lives of Norman and Ethel Thayer. This was a well-directed piece of theatre supported with experienced performers that combined to present the audience with an evening of thought-provoking entertainment.

Staging, Lighting and Sound

This was a traditional set that didn't present any surprises but did the job of setting the scene almost exactly as the script prescribes. Lighting was straightforward and allowed us to see the performers in full. In plays like these we just need to see what is going on and to be absorbed into the story without distraction from over-complicated lighting states. I liked the changes you made to the exterior lighting through the windows as the story evolved. Given that all the action takes place inside, this is very important.

Sound design was pretty straightforward, I guess, as it was rare that you had to balance one voice with another at the same time. However, it was

well operated and gave right the right volume for the space we were in. The scene changes were slick but maybe you could have introduced some background music just to ease those blackout transitions.

Norman

You are clearly an accomplished actor and you had mastered exactly the mid-American accent that was required for this role. I particularly liked the pace of your delivery. It created a perfect balance of clever wit and a labored style that matched Norman's age and eccentricity. You are the centre of the story and you are rarely off stage so it's a big role and the key to it is to get your audience engaged and empathetic to you. From the outset we have to understand the way your mind works and that means letting us in, which you did with ease. I enjoyed the fact that you were so clearly relaxed in this character and therefore we knew that the story was in safe hands. Everything about your physical moments, your spacing between the other characters (particularly with your daughter and your wife) and your gestures towards Bill and Billy underpinned the true nature of Norman and all the frustrations he has as an ageing man. I am sure that everyone in the audience of a certain age could relate to some of the things you were feeling.

Your voice had some lovely melodic lines in it and there was a real texture in your intonation. As for your relationship with Ethel, this is an intense one to measure and getting the balance right here makes or breaks the entire plot. You showed us not only that Norman was fiercely independent, but also completely dependent on Ethel and wrestling with those two contradictory emotions was tough for Norman to handle.

Ethel

I began by wondering if your delivery was a little slow and pedantic, but as I got to know your character and the way you had decided to play Ethel, I realized that this was a deliberate ploy to show how you had tolerated Norman for many years and stayed sane even through his irritating moments. I think it's a tricky character to get right and I have seen some actresses fail to demonstrate the huge pool of love and affection that is the bedrock of the relationship between Ethel and Norman. This is largely insinuated throughout the play up to the point

when Norman has a mild heart attack. However, in your portrayal of this character we were left in no doubt how much Ethel loved Norman and in those moments when she thought he was dying you showed palpable and raw emotion.

Chelsea

Well done for creating a character that combined all the middle aged neuroses that this role requires as well as the affection you needed to show towards your mother... and in the end your father too. It is a complex role and you don't get much of a chance to develop in on stage, so that means you have to communicate a lot in a short space of time. I loved the argument you have with your mother – that was a really good piece of theatre and all the audience were totally enthralled by it. And your awkwardness around your father was heartbreaking. We longed for you both to break down the barriers but (as in life) it didn't quite happen and we sensed the inevitability of that unresolved ending. You have a lot of mixed emotions to pack into just a few short scenes but you did a great job.

Bill

Bill needs to be slightly defensive, eager to please and lacking in self-confidence. I thought you managed all that with ease. Your movements across the stage showed a good appreciation of letting some air into what can be a claustrophobic set and that was refreshing to see. Your tete a tete with Norman was a particularly good dramatic moment and those tiny pauses between your retorts spoke volumes. We need to feel your discomfort and we certainly did. Well done.

Billy Ray Jr.

What a talented young man you are. I liked your performance from the moment you arrived on stage with your face all alight with youthful enthusiasm and a teenager's swagger. You had some lovely facial expressions. In the second half you really came into your own and grew in confidence on stage, which was perfect timing for your character development in the story

Charlie

Charlie needs to have a friendly and open demeanour and of course that infectious laugh that goes on just a little too long. Well done for sustaining this character throughout. I felt your Bristol accent trying to pop out of your contained American drawl, but you did well to keep it under control.

Telephone Operator

We don't see you on stage, but your voice plays an important part in getting the story underway. You had just the right amount of frustration and impatience in your delivery and this made a perfect foil for Norman's confusion, which was so important for us to get to know his personality in those early scenes.

This is a story that, although was originally created for a stage performance, became widely known when Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn starred in the 1981 film of the same name. It is full of pathos, comedy and tragedy – an intoxicating mix of love and loss. It is a testament to Ernest Thompson that these issues still ring true some 40 years since its debut in 1978. This play can be too challenging for some amateur groups so we don't see it performed very often outside the capital cities, but your director took it on with confidence and chose accomplished performers; the result was impressive.

Thank you so much for your hospitality and warm welcome and I wish you all the best for the festive season. I look forward to coming to more productions in 2018.

CJW

22.12.17