

# **NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD FULLLENGTH FESTIVAL 2012-2013**

**Group:** Writtle CARDS  
**Venue:** Writtle Village Hall  
**Date of adjudication:** 21<sup>st</sup> June 2013  
**Production:** Calendar Girls  
**Director:** Laura Bennett

## **Introduction**

This has proved to be a very popular choice for groups this year and given the popularity of the television and film version of the piece it was intriguing to see how the group would tackle the play. It certainly offers a good selection of women's roles which is always welcome.

## **Front of House**

Hilary Jones assisted by members of Writtle

Women's Institute

## **Poster design**

Laura Bennett

## **Programme and auditorium design**

Clare Williams

I've grouped these things together as they all contributed to the first impressions we had of the production. We were warmly greeted by front of house staff and the posters and programmes used the sunflower emblem to good effect. An interesting touch was to have cancer research there with some of their merchandise to encourage charitable donations.

The hall itself was decked with relevant posters and information interspersed with the sunflowers throughout. Front of house staff also wore the sunflowers giving a well co-ordinated look to the venue and making us feel we had just wandered into a WI meeting.

## **Set design and build**

Pete Goodwin assisted by Chris Saxton, Tom Harris and members of cast and crew

The set was a very believable village hall, the stacked chairs, noticeboard (authentically decorated with notices and unclaimed raffle tickets), the tea hatch and the statutory health and safety notices worked well. I particularly liked the way the colour scheme of the real hall had been carried through to the set making us feel we were truly part the action. The sense of continuity drew the eye down the hall onto the stage giving it an inclusive feel.

Outdoor scenes were achieved with a simple transformation using a narrow, well painted scenic flat encouraging us to fill in the rest with our imagination.

**Stage managers**

Chris Saxton and Jim Crozier

Transitions between scenes were smoothly handled and there was plenty to do. The team had obviously been well rehearsed with effects such as the letters fluttering down effectively timed. The only disappointment in the staging /scenery was the last scene where the black boxes for the sunflowers were put into position while the cast were on stage. We wondered if it would have been possible for the blocks to have been put in place as quickly as possible before the lights went up then the actresses could have come on holding a few sunflowers each to put in the holes. The final effect was good but it did seem to take a long time to get there and getting to that point felt a bit clumsy.

**Sound and Lighting**

Tom Harris

This side of the production worked really well, sound cues were accurately placed and supported the mood of the moment. The sound quality of the birdsong reinforced the illusion of being outdoors with the car horn and screeching brakes adding to the effect. The seasonal music was well chosen and segued effectively, the use of dramatic music added to the urgency and excitement of the photograph scene. Lighting for the interior scenes worked well but for the outdoor scenes we felt it needed to be more pronounced and the curtain call could have been more clearly defined. The cue lights for the WI conference were a good touch although we didn't get the full green/amber/red sequence.

**Props**

Janet Osborne Williams

There was plenty of work here for Janet to co-ordinate and all appeared to be well chosen, the photography equipment and studio paraphernalia was authentic. The props for the photographs were great and we liked the pile of unmovable oranges in the marmalade vignette. The Westlife fir cones were particularly well done and very funny, the plaque for the settee looked genuine and the way the projector for the broccoli talk showed green meant that there was no lack of attention to detail.

**Costume**

Jan Irving assisted by Jodee Goodwin

Costumes had been well chosen and enhanced the characters' personalities. The woolly hat with curls for John was a good touch and allowed the contrast for his later appearance. The Victorian costumes were rightly, of varying degrees of authenticity, Marie and Lady Cravenshire had some wonderful hats and outfits for the formal occasion and careful thought had been given to accessories. The costumes for the 'flower scene' were particularly imaginative and worked really well. There was the potential for some extra padding for Celia to add to the credibility of her 'outstanding assets' but overall effectively handled.

**Cast****Chris**

Paulette Harris

Paulette led the pace of this production from the start and gave us a characterisation that presented Chris as not only a strong woman but one whose compassion and self-awareness grew throughout the play. The relationship between Chris and Annie was effective with good interactions and believable reactions. Chris's forceful personality also came through in Paulette's exchanges with Rod showing how determined she is. Her really powerful delivery of the conference speech was a highlight, passionate and sincere using her anger as a motivational force.

### **Celia**

Michele Moody

This character needs to be chic and have an air of sophistication about her, which Michelle certainly portrayed. We enjoyed her clear delivery, especially her opinions of the golf club. Michele's graceful posture gave her character an easy elegance which also became 'cougarish' at moments – totally appropriate. She also had a nicely diffident manner which allowed her to be a leader at moments and thrust herself into the limelight. The more reflective moments were sincerely delivered.

### **Jessie**

Barbara Llewellyn

Giving Barbara the chance to present this character with a Scottish accent worked well and added to her business-like tone, her timing was impeccable and her understated delivery revealed a sharp intellect at work. Barbara delivered her comedy punchlines with flair, the characterisation was handled beautifully. Her photograph scene was delightfully funny. We enjoyed this performance very much.

### **Marie**

Jean Speller

This was an interesting interpretation of the character with a sharp, waspish tone frequently being used to 'persuade' her fellow WI members. Her neat, precise movements helped to emphasise her assumed air of authority and her wheedling manner was well portrayed. In the quiet moments Jean managed a stillness which allowed her to seethe effectively. Some good reactions when debating the difference between naked and nude.

### **John**

Daniel Curley

In some ways this role is the most challenging. Daniel caught John's humour and vivacity beautifully in his pre-chemotherapy scenes. His gradual decline was sensitively handled with Daniel's body language clearly reflecting his diminishing strength making the poignancy of his death all the more apparent. A lovely moment when he was giving the sunflower seeds out. His 'women of Yorkshire' speech was well handled and nicely restrained. It would have been very easy to have 'overdone' this making it overtly sentimental but as it was it captured a tender reflection.

### **Lady Cravenshire**

Leila Francis

A great little role, this was a good contrast to the friendly rapport between the WI members. Leila's manner was nicely aloof and upright making her a good 'foil' for

the antics and remarks of the others. Her shocked reaction made a good closing moment to the first half.

**Liam**

Toby Harris

This small but supportive role was well played by Toby. His smooth-talking delivery reflected the unsubtle consumerism which can easily overtake the best of intentions, but it also revealed Chris's desire to be in the limelight. Toby's confident handling of the role was therefore a valued part of the production as a whole.

**Annie**

Sharon Goodwin

The relationship between Chris and Annie was totally believable partly due to the contrast in the presentation of this character. Sharon gave us a gentleness which made her outburst at Chris all the more effective. The 'back and forth' passing of the cake tin worked well. There was good teamwork between Annie and Chris throughout. The more emotional moments were well captured except for the blanket –holding which we felt was a little too long. Sharon managed to capture Annie's underlying strength of character well.

**Cora**

Beth Crozier

This role requires the bravest pose of all and Beth gave us a sparkling performance, she has a beautiful voice and really gave us a character full of spirit and soul full of jazz and blues. We liked the echoes of her 'hippy' past coming through and the mother /daughter conflicts were expressed with an air of truthfulness and quiet. This is a performance that grew in stature throughout the play. Her strong vocal leadership in the singing was a real asset.

**Ruth**

Liz Curley

Liz threw herself wholeheartedly into this role with good facial expressions and reactions. Her delivery of the line 'My Eddie's been away' from the floor after the Westlife incident was really funny, in fact she handled the stage business of making the cones dropping to the floor at just the right moment well. She really imbued this character with energy and determination. Her transformation by the end of the play came through strongly with her stylish appearance and wonderful smile.

**Rod**

Boot Banes

Rod came across as a clearly bemused man in the first half of the show, with Boot giving us the clear impression of a man who knows when he's beaten by a determined wife. In the second half the characterisation was definitely more forceful and so the personality became more clearly defined Boot seemed more comfortable and confident with this part of the performance.

**Brenda Hulse**

Jessie Rose

Although Jessie's appearance in this role was brief she did convince us she was a broccoli expert! Nicely handled.

**Lawrence**

Neil Smith

This is a delightful role and Neil did it justice with a very sincere performance. His tentative manner with the ladies and his determination to show how artistic the pictures could be was very convincing. His reaction to recognising his 'old' schoolteacher with the excessive vodka-gulping was one of the comic highlights of the production.

**Elaine**

Shelley Goodwin

A good cameo performance from Shelley looking every inch the beautician! Her manner when talking to Ruth was just nicely patronising and she showed clear reactions to the revelation of her 'card'.

**Director**

Laura Bennett

Laura made some really good choices when casting this production. The variety in her actors' heights became an asset used to good effect in presenting the different characters to us. It would have been easy to have made some obvious choices such as casting Paulette as Marie, the imposing chair of the WI, instead having Jean in that role allowed other presentations to be explored. We also felt there was a genuine sense of camaraderie between the members of the cast, something which is only achieved when a director has the ability to inspire trust and confidence. All the cast showed good awareness of the relationships between the characters resulting in convincing characterisations.

The production was well paced, brisk and funny during quick action exchanges interspersed with a more graceful pace for the more poignant moments.

Music was mostly used well to create mood and emotion, in a couple of places it was in danger of being overdone. The most effective moment here was the shorter clip of 'Annie's Song' in the poem reading scene where John passed through the assembled ladies. There was also strong choral work from the cast in the songs well led by Beth Crozier.

Given the physical restrictions of the venue the photography scenes were well managed with so many props, lighting equipment and people to co-ordinate everything ran smoothly reflecting thorough preparation.

Overall we felt the production had been directed intelligently and sensitively with a clear sense of cohesion between the front and backstage elements of the show.

Thank you for your hospitality and the opportunity to see the show.

Best wishes  
Maggi Fisher

accompanied by Liz Mullen