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Society : Mortimer Dramatic Society
Production : 84, Charing Cross Road
Date : 25/05/2024
Venue : St. John's Hall, Mortimer
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

Show Report

Thank you for inviting me to your production of 84, Charing Cross Road and for the lovely welcome I received from front of house when I arrived.

84 Charing Cross Road is an interesting play in that most of the script consists of the letters exchanged between the characters presented as monologues. Set in two locations, New York and London, the text of the letters is brought to life by the cast.

Cast

Sarah Roper was excellent as Helene Hanff, the American playwright, and her acting style brought the character to life, with a lovely sense of humour, mixed with occasional bursts of frustration, where required. These contrasts in her demeanor gave a lovely dynamic range to the character. Her growing affinity and friendship with Frank and the staff at the London bookshop came through warmly in her portrayal. Sarah delivered her lines with a soft American accent which never faltered.

Matt Comiskey was very convincing in his portrayal of Frank Doel, the knowledgeable and mild-mannered manager of the Marks and Co. in London. He was perfect as the rather reserved Englishman, eager to please Helene by finding the many books she requested and full of apologies when things went awry. I was totally drawn in by him and his brilliant characterisation. His line delivery was very naturalistic, and whilst formal felt conversational rather than scripted.

These two actors were superb. Their delivery was so natural that by the end, I felt that I knew the characters as people and almost forgot that it was a scripted piece. Their timing and pace of delivery was outstanding, both in the dialogue and in their movement. Both spoke clearly and we never

missed a word. The play calls for the utmost level of commitment from the two main actors who are rarely off stage and is a testament to the many hours they must have spent learning their parts.

The two main actors were well supported by a succession of shop assistants. These characters did not have a great deal of dialogue, but their acting and characterisation made up for it as they constantly busied themselves in the bookshop and back office. The difficulty with this type of role is that there is a temptation to find yourself watching the person who is speaking, however, I didn't notice any of the actors casting a glance their way. To the contrary, they were always in character, reacting and interacting as appropriate.

Together, **Dawne West** playing Cecily Farr and **Alys Codd** as Megan Wells had developed a very believable working relationship with some lovely interactions, particularly when they burst into song. **Dawne** gave a good performance with a lovely charm to her characterisation. We clearly saw that she too was invested in the correspondence received from Helene, choosing covertly to start to correspond herself. She interacted well with Frank and the other staff. **Alys** brought a lot to the part of Megan Wells, despite having few words. In her facial expressions and reactions, she brought out the poignant elements of the story and I particularly enjoyed her farewell scene.

John Bale played Mr Martin who was busy in the back of the bookshop most of the time. He sat at a period style high desk busying himself and interacting with the other shop assistants in the background.

Cynthia Newman as business-like Mrs Todd and **Jean Chapman** as the deadpan Billie, worked together well and despite seemingly being serious and busy workers had moments of humour interlaced in their scenes.

The only other American character: Helene's friend Maxine Stuart was played by **Chloë Smith**. She was amusing and quite charming, delivering a gently humorous monologue that explained so much about the character and the friendship between herself and Helene.

Additional and I think recorded voices were played by **Sam Foad** (Alvin the postman) and Tom **Shorrocks** (Pilot)

Creatives

Mari Fleming (Director) with **Katja Hunt** (Producer)

Mari had woven together a dynamic piece of theatre which ebbed and flowed perfectly, and she had captured the nuances of this unusual style of play. She had clearly worked with the two leads to inhabit their characters and to produce a natural piece of drama. All the cast had clear characters which blended very well. Most of the cast had very few lines, but Mari had ensured that their actions although at times very subtle added to the whole production. I was moved by the handling of Frank's gradual decline and Helene's eventual visit to the shop after he had died which Mari had directed with honesty and sensitivity.

Ensuring the smooth running of the production did I am sure keep Katja very busy as she supported Mari in delivering this excellent play.

Kerry Thomas (Stage Manager)

Kerry managed backstage efficiently and all the props that were brought on were in the right place at the right time. She also managed the set change to Helene's new apartment smoothly and quietly with minimal impact to the pace of the play.

Rob Wilderspin (Lighting Design and Operation)

The lighting plot was well designed with subtle changes to distinguish between day and evening. Rob also cleverly lit the split stage so that our attention was drawn to the where the dialogue was taking place.

Tom Shorrocks (Sound Design and Operation)

There were some good choices of background music which mirrored the passing of time from the late 1940's to the 1960's. The sound effects were appropriate and well cued.

Neil Johnson (Set Design) with **Nick Pounder** (Back Stage Painting) and **Neil Johnson, John Bale, Dyson England and Society Members** (Set Build)

The split box set was well designed with a small dividing wall at the back between the two sides. Helene's apartment was comfortable with furniture reminiscent of the time-period in the USA. The book shop at 84 Charing Cross Road was beautifully designed and constructed to include a wall full of books, some painted and others real and in tall bookshelves. The furniture was well sourced, and I definitely felt that we were looking at an old-fashioned bookstore.

Amy Collins (Costumes)

The costumes were well designed and perfect for the two locations. Helene's comfortable and casual attire was right for the New York setting and looking at pictures of the real Helene Hanff were authentic. In contrast Frank Doel's formal suits and the shop assistants' black skirts and blouses worked well for the London book shop. Bringing in a splash of colour was Maxine with her bright red polka dot tea dress which was perfect for her character.

Society Members (Properties)

The props were very authentic, and the small changes that were made as the years went by, kept the set real. There were plenty of authentic looking hard back books on the shop shelves, but I was amused to notice that there was a Gary Rhodes cookbook amongst them! I was glad however to see that Helene's very prominent gin bottle was Gordon's which was a gin widely available in the USA in the 1940's and 50's. The flags for the coronation added some colour and cheer to the set and the metal Easter eggs brought back memories of similar ones that my Parent's had. I also really liked the rocking duck money box.

Phil Collins (Programme)

The programme included an introduction from the director and some interesting background to the book and play 84, Charing Cross Road. I am always glad to see photographs of the cast in the programme and a full list of the creatives behind the scenes. The picture on the front cover, was very nicely designed with a split street scene of New York and London which fitted nicely with the play's content.

I saw from the director's introduction that this play was very special to MDS as it was to be the directorial debut of a much-loved member of the society who due to delays sadly died before he could put it on. I am sure that he would have been proud of what the cast and creative team produced tonight. Congratulations to everyone for this excellent performance, I thoroughly enjoyed the play and look forward to joining you again in the autumn.

Cate

Cate Naylor
NODA London District 13 Representative

