

Thame Players production of  
"A Bunch of Amateurs" by Ian Hislop and Nick Newman

"If it be true that good wine needs no bush, tis true that a good play needs no epilogue."  
'As you Like it' by William Shakespeare

"A Bunch of Amateurs" by Ian Hislop and Nick Newman and performed by the Thame Players is indeed a good wine but still, an epilogue, albeit a review, is desirable for those who missed this fine wine tasting, poetically on the stage and, in reality, at the foyer bar.

The play is a smart choice by Thame Players. An amateur dramatics group staging a production about an amateur dramatics group staging a production of Shakespeare's "King Lear". Surely, no lack of in-house stage experience for this production, but to produce a comedy revolving around a Shakespeare tragedy takes some doing.

The curtain does not rise at the Stratford theatre, but instead the Stratford Players director walks through the curtain to set the scene for the audience. The theatre is on the verge of closing and there are plans for executive homes to be built on its site. The message is loud and clear. We need to save the theatre and, by the way, "even executives need drama". She steps aside to give way to a massive television screen filling the stage. It is showing a James Bondesque movie trailer for a film starring Jefferson Steele. Who? We soon find out as the trailer is followed by a TV news clip of Jefferson being interviewed by the media on his arrival at Heathrow Airport. Jefferson is a fading Hollywood star, full of his own importance and questionable fame. He is coming to England determined to boost his fading career with a Shakespearean tour de force. But that is not quite how it all works out for him. He accepted the title role in Shakespeare's "King Lear", being produced by the Stratford Players, believing he would be appearing on the stage of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford upon Avon. No such look. Jefferson soon discovers that he has signed up with the Stratford Players, not in Stratford upon Avon, Warwickshire, but in the village of Stratford St John, Suffolk.

The play is a brilliant comedy, full of hilarious comic lines and comic scenes, based on the cultural differences of a Hollywood actor meeting ordinary Suffolk country folk. "Arse not ass!" There are plenty of twists and turns in the plot and, as with all dramas, a fair share of suspense, controversy, jealousy, strong language, scandal, betrayal, an off-stage visit to A&E, and a dash of sex, well at least one, or was it two, kisses. All this while trying to rehearse for a production of "King Lear".

The production was funny, and very laughable, for which credit must go to Director Steve Lambell and Colin Lee, his assistant. Excellent casting and direction which the actors thoroughly enjoyed. A happy Green Room? Yes, I guess.

In the production there was, of course, another director, Dorothy Nettle, played by Becky Powell, the director of the Stratford Players production of "King Lear". Becky, multi-talented in her role, was the cool, calm, and collected conductor of this theatrical symphony, keeping all the actors in tune and on page. She may be the underrated star of the production.

Victor Gaultney's portrayal of Jefferson Steele was convincing. He cleverly brought Jefferson's characteristics to the role, from the ego-centric brashness of a Hollywood actor to the mellow amateur thespian from Suffolk. Had Victor observed many "Jeffersons" when he was a student in the USA and used this experience to benefit of us all?

Nigel Dewbury, played by Brian Holt, is an old thespian dear, playing the part of the Earl of Kent in "King Lear". Kent constantly gets himself into trouble throughout the Shakespeare play by being extremely blunt, outspoken, and scheming, which is very much the Nigel in the Stratford Players. Brian and, consequently, Nigel's performances had true insight into the characters they were playing. In fact, they were both inspired casting by the Thame and Stratford Directors.

Richard Potts, as the thumbs up handyman-cum-thespian, Dennis Dobbins, was a comic delight. His mobility limo, selfies and eyeballing routines were worthy of Eric Morecombe.

Colleen Tudway, as Mary Plunkett, was starstruck from the moment her eyes set on Jefferson. Colleen's flirting performance was brilliantly funny, especially the way she portrayed Mary fawning all over Jefferson, intent on providing him with more than just bed and breakfast.

Jessica Beare really impressed as Jessica Steele, the daughter of Jefferson. Jessica had the difficult task of playing

the role of a teenager dealing with the emotional ups and downs of a distant father and her own theatrical ambitions. Jessica made the task look easy. As an aside, in an amusing cameo with Mary Plunkett, Jefferson had the pills, including the blue one, to illustrate his roller coaster emotional career.

Jodie Moorwood's role as Lauren Bell, the young wife of the societies sponsor, was theatrical multi-tasking. She showed great versatility in her many roles, worthy of the saying, "a jack of all trades is a master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one." Her performance was one of the "oftentimes", both funny and believable. Her massaging rolling pin was a sight for sore backs.

The unknown video production team deserve credit for the James Bond movie at the start of the production. It requires a high degree of imagination, creativity, and professional editing skills to create a comic movie skit with that "made in the kitchen" look. The helicopter crash on the Thame Market car park was, out of this world, imagination. Far more entertaining than the helicopter lift-off in Miss Saigon. Let us not forget, there was a taste of "King Lear" at the end, well performed, as to be expected.

There was the odd slip of the tongue, "Stratford UPON Avon" please and a stray piece of furniture fleetingly appearing on the stage, but let us not forget, it was a comedy, excellent comic lines and excellent comic timing from all the cast. Laughter and Shakespeare, what a way to spend an evening.

Thank you, Thame Players, for what turned out to be a wonderful evening.

Chris Behan