Pub theatre at its best: The Real Inspector Hound

Where do you start with this latest production from West Meon Theatre? I suggest The Thomas Lord pub where an excellent pre-theatre supper sets you up for the theatrical challenge ahead. After that, glass in hand, you move a few steps to the theatre, essentially the pub’s main restaurant area into which 50 spectators, a set and a cast of nine are crammed. Like ‘fringe theatre’ is how director Mary Dawson aptly described it. Everyone is very close to the action.

The play sends up the classic country house murder mystery of the Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle genre, with three dead on the floor as the play ends and the murderer or murderers still at liberty and nobody sure who is the real Inspector Hound.

The plot? No point trying to explain it, ten different people would give you ten different answers. And it really doesn’t matter. It’s about words and language and wit. It’s a play within a play, initially watched from the back of the stage by two theatre critics, Moon (Matt Beames) whose preoccupation is advancing his career, and Birdboot (Mick Keegan) who has a fondness for the ladies. A nicely-balanced duo.

This being a Tom Stoppard play, the language is rich and demands a lot of the actors. Melodramatic pauses, over-emphasis of ‘significant’ words and exaggerated gestures take much of the dialogue over the top and the audience is left to marvel at how well the cast delivered it all. It isn’t just about the wit of the script, it’s about the witty way all the actors put it over. The posh ladies are terrific, Felicity (Katie Jacobs) and Cynthia (Rachel Wells) milking every line and posturing to perfection.

In the second act the line between the play and reality blurs. Moon tells us ‘it’s turning into a farce’, as Birdboot decides to answer the telephone on stage and thus becomes involved in the play and soon becomes dead. Moon is wrong and soon he’s dead too. Because this is a farce from the opening line when Mrs Drudge the maid, played by the excellent Helena Gomm, answers the phone: ‘Hallo, the drawing room of Lady Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring’. By the end of the play she’s heard all the actors threatening to commit murder.

Farce? Simon (Crispian Cook) stands by the radio as he is described as a dangerous man in the locality by the announcer, but nobody identifies him. Magnus (Rufus Warner) spends most of the play in a wheelchair wearing a farcical moustache. In the final moments he rips off his moustache, leaps from the chair, claims to be Cynthia’s long-lost husband Albert, pulls a gun and shoots Moon. The cast pays no more than passing attention to the growing pile of corpses. Well, when you’ve seen one...

The audience laughed a lot. The four performances sold out and the restaurant was solidly booked, demonstrating an appetite for this kind of entertainment. What better way to spend a winter evening? To the generous applause for the actors, applause for stage manager Jo Mitchell, for Vanessa Albertini whose touch was evident in the evocative 1960s costumes, for Peter Theobald who created the music and for Chris and Bethany Town who expertly managed light and sound. Mary Dawson as always brought out the best of both script and actors as well as adding deft touches of her own. To The Thomas Lord and West Meon Theatre goes much credit for this stimulating evening.

Peter Moore