

METHWOLD THEATRE CLUB  
Farndale Avenue... Christmas Carol

DIRECTORS  
Sarah Appleton & Sheila Welland

VENUE  
St George's Hall Complex

DATE  
Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2018

I will fully admit that I knew nothing of the Farndale selection of plays, and took the header on the advertisement to be little more than an additional bureaucratic notice before heading off to Methwold to watch (what I thought was) a straight performance of Dickens' finest piece of writing – I have had the misfortune of being assigned reading of many of his works during my university days. However, despite my significant dislike for CD's works on the whole, A Christmas Carol has always been a favourite of mine - regardless of season. As such, an Easter jaunt down to Methwold to watch Scrooge & Marley seemed a splendid way to spend a Saturday evening.

I will admit to being somewhat underwhelmed upon entering, as the hall dressing consisted of a single Christmas tree in a corner adjacent the stage. I felt that a few additional decorations or Christmas themed touches would have provided a suitable launching off point, as some of the punters may be not possess the seasonal agility as to find their Christmas spirit as they found their seats on a rather mild April evening. However, this is where the duplicity of the show presents its first challenge.

The Farndale canon (I have since discovered) are a collection of shows within shows. In story, there is the fictitious Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society, who consistently put on a performance of a well-loved classic, which the audience then collectively watch fall to pieces. Imagine Noises Off but the entirety of the show is the disastrous 3<sup>rd</sup> act. This has its challenges as first-time viewers of the Farndale Universe are playing catch-up on the more subtle 'real-life' personas and conflicts presenting themselves. With this in mind, a shrewd choice of title is absolutely paramount to the audience's enjoyment as for expectations to be subverted, they need to be very familiar with the source material and the directors hit the bullseye with their choice of A Christmas Carol, a tale so familiar that every detour from the intimately known script was identified appropriately by the audience.

The set (design uncredited but construction by Alan Camfield & The MTC members) was simplistic, which is what it should be for such a presentation. The

show excelled more in its construction of key props (Claire Tough, José O'Ware) especially in the creation of the Ghost of Christmas Present. By keeping the aesthetic largely minimal it allowed the focus of the audience to remain on the ramshackle nonsense taking place on (and off) the stage. Lighting (Terry Shapland) was note perfect and Sound (Terry Shapland, and Anna Ephithite, with a special thanks to David Thomas) was a true strength throughout with the 'off-stage' radios providing some of the biggest laughs of the evening thanks to some wonderful accidental frequencies picked up. Costumes (Tina Camfield and Rosemary Gibson) were magnificent. With a slightly minimalist set, this was of the utmost import in maintaining the established and expected characters in question.

As for the actors, I loved Teresa Thomas as Thelma/Ebenezer Scrooge. Despite everything falling wrong around Thelma, Ms Thomas was able to demonstrate Thelma's commitment to powering through as the show's straight-man until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act, where she too takes her turn in the madness as the show unravels (much to the delight of the audience). In fact, Teresa managed to garner a lot of support for Scrooge (or Thelma), but at this point they're almost inseparable. However, this is all a set-up for a 3<sup>rd</sup> act reveal that the local vicar is backstage and is a fan of Thelma's. This allows for a 3<sup>rd</sup> act showdown between Thelma and Mrs Reece with a pair of runaway egos that had me in stitches. My sides would not have hurt so much if Ms Thomas' sweet portrayal of Thelma hadn't proven for one last magnificent subversion of my expectations as she sells out her artistic integrity for yet another plaudit from the parish parson.

Cameron Mynett was enjoyable as Gordon. Britain's 2018 powerlifting champion (I kid you not) had a jarring contrast to the rest of the slightly more mature female cast that truly sold his presence as the stagehand, Gordon. A role that he seemed more comfortable in than some of Mr Dickens' creations. There were moments where some of his quick-fire exchanges with Scrooge did seem to fall a little flat. However, his performance as the bottom half of the Ghost of Christmas Present was (without qualification) my favourite set piece of the show.

Linda Malster was a delight and was without qualification, the most versatile member of the show as Felicity. In a production where so much is dependent on two narratives (Scrooge's redemption, and the Teresa Thomas/Mrs Reece feud), it often fell to Mrs Malster to 'make up the numbers' if you will and many of the best laughs were present for her portrayals of half a dozen characters.. Due to the big personalities of the other parts, it was essential that Felicity was played with a softer, nuanced touch, which it most certainly was. Apologies for the second call-back but the image of Mrs Malster some 10 feet plus in the air as the top half of the Ghost of Christmas Present was an outstanding visual that had the crowd in raucous applause and laughter, both of which I was boisterously participating in.

In the prologue for the show, we find out that Mercedes (played by Tina Camfield) has injured her neck in a tragic shopping trolley accident. At this time, Ms Camfield shuffled her way up the centre of the hall and I questioned to myself, 'can she really keep this up for 2 plus hours?' I didn't know the half of it. A consistently deadpan delivery throughout aided Ms Camfield's portrayal of Mercedes for consistently the biggest laughs of the night. She clearly understood where the humour was located each time she was on stage and manipulated the audience response for maximum impact. Ms Camfield clearly understands comedy; the key to her performance was that Mercedes never knew she was being funny. A trait that seems to be disappearing in am dram to a degree. A key highlight had to be her portrayal of Scrooge's betrothed in the break-up of Belle and Scrooge, where 'Scrooge' (continuing on script) mourns that Belle's already left (despite her shuffling presence being very much to the contrary) and he then opines that he will never see his love again (as she returns and makes eye contact – she'd exited in the wrong wing and had to return from whence she came). There is no hyperbole when I say that I laughed until my sides hurt.

When I first entered the hall at St. George's Hall Complex, I was greeted by Rosemary Gibson, who - unbeknownst to me – had already begun her performance as Mrs Reece, the chairwoman of the fictitious Farndale Dramatic Society. Equal parts pretention, madness, aloofness, it is the role of a pantomime dame manifested with only the subtlest of touches and a complete absence of self-awareness. The mad master of ceremonies requires a deft touch to stop it from becoming a farce of a different type, and Ms Gibson pulled it off. Often bullying her way through the other characters (as it should be), a delight of the narrative has to be the civil war between Mrs Reece and Thelma over the accolades of best actor by the local vicar. If Ms Gibson hadn't established her character so well, the resistance by Thelma wouldn't have been near as interesting or well-supported. On a complete side-note, my inquires revealed that Ms Gibson was the master-baker behind what I can only call the best piece of coffee cake I have ever been treated to at Intermission.

In surmising the show as a whole, the greatest strength of the show is its greatest weakness (or is that the other way around?) A show that highlights the mistakes made by a fictional production of the internal show, gets a lot of leverage for any mistakes that may occur in its own performance. There were exchanges where the intended humour of the conversation fell flat, and while I do think that the script bears its share of responsibility for that, it felt like there were some issues in pacing and characterisation, with the Scrooge/Marley confrontation feeling especially stunted. Overall though, these were in the minority and the show was a source of a great many laughs. This was a surreal performance in that it felt that it was more a big sitting room than a regimented performance (and I mean this in the best possible light); it was akin to sitting in the middle of a giant inside joke, and the longer I had the pleasure of staying, the more I was able to pick up on it. Once the show freed itself of the shackles of

Dickens' tome and exploded into full-on panto-esque madness, I had been fully indoctrinated. I still don't fully know what it was that I saw, but I do know that I liked it, considerably. Ms Appleton and Ms Welland should be proud of an enjoyable show and I would gladly make a return trip down to Methwold for an upcoming show – especially if a repeat of said coffee cake can be arranged.

Ian Gooda