

**THE
ROSE
BOWL
AWARDS**
FOR AMATEUR
DRAMA & MUSIC

**Habeas Corpus
By Alan Bennett**

The Hanham Players

**Adjudicated by Rebecca Thompson
1st October 2008**

Popularly known as a '70's sex farce, Bennett's play actually stretches this theatrical genre in terms of theme and structure, allowing the playwright to use it as a vehicle for social comment. Set in the home of Dr. Wicksteed and his frustrated wife, 'Habeas Corpus' provides an hilarious look at the lusts and loves of the middle classes, whilst exploring the sadness of humanity as it faces disease, death and decay.

Presentation

Bennett himself intended that this should be a play that 'strips farce to its bare essentials..', indicating that the set should consist of three wooden chairs (in fact in the original production four chairs were initially used, but one was removed during the rehearsal period!) This of course means that all the usual entrances, exits, doors, props and paraphernalia are lacking, and the players need to draw on the text in order to communicate the bustle and hilarity demanded by this genre. The stark set also serves to highlight the isolation of these characters, whilst they are desperate to connect with those around them.

You had replaced the three chairs with a chaise longue, a white window frame at the back and a screen. Two chairs were placed upstage centre, in front of the window. There were two entrances either side of the stage and the pier was represented stage left with a small thrust, edged with a white railing. Additional props included Mrs. Swabb's period vacuum cleaner, the phone, the Canon's bicycle and of course Connie's all important appliances.

The bare set of this piece presents challenges for both players and director. The lack of furniture and dressing restricts the potential for stage business, and there are limited options for blocking during the many ensemble moments on the stage. The chaise longue was a good idea in that it provided scope for players to sit, move and loll together; however, the side entrances were prohibitive, resulting in an undermining of some of those key, stylised moments – such as Felicity's first entrance. Maybe an upstage entrance would have served better here?

Stage Management was efficient.

Lighting/FX

Dimmed lights at the beginning served to underline the almost surreal atmosphere of this play; full lighting was implemented when all the characters were introduced. Spots on Wicksteed during his soliloquies were utilised to good effect, and some effort had been made to represent the war time scene. Final dimming was also effective. The opportunities for stylised lighting during the range of non-naturalistic moments were not fully exploited – the flashing FX were not totally successful.

Phone and siren FX were well-timed.

Costume

The costume was timeless rather than period in many ways, although there were some interesting touches of characterisation – Wicksteed's rather fetching tank top and the Cannon's yellow socks and Shank's garters. Connie was suitably dowdy, but transformed seductively at the end and Lady Rumpers appropriately austere. The Wedding hats were a nice touch, and Mrs Swabb a pleasing representation of the 'domestic.' Felicity's dress was striking, but it did slightly inhibit her in terms of freedom of movement.

Direction

After a slightly slow start, this production gained in pace, energy and confidence. There was a good understanding of the tone of Bennett's dialogue, and a very strong sense of warmth and collaboration from the whole ensemble. Casting was good, which had resulted in some effective and thoughtful characterisation. On the whole, lines were secure – although there was a dip in concentration at the start of Act 2 – and there was some very effective pointing of Bennett's humour throughout.

One of the main challenges of this play is the placing – the sparse set establishing a very clinical and timeless environment. The range of characterisation here did go some way to enhance a successful delivery of Bennett's wit, but there was a lack of appreciation of the range of theatrical styles within the farce. A key way of achieving this is to encourage and develop the physicality of the players – in terms of their overall delivery of character in word and movement and in their

rapport with each other. The moments of fondling, dancing and reacting should have all been far more energetic, seductive and exaggerated. Bennett is giving both players and director the opportunity to have fun as they relish in a range of styles of delivery – so do allow your cast to grasp these opportunities fully. The lack of physicality did result in some rather too understated delivery at times: acoustics are not brilliant at this venue, but it is important to attack Bennett's dialogue with appropriate projection and indeed articulation to cope with the very wordy speeches!

Another challenge is of course the lack of furniture and your blocking resulted in some very straight lines at times. As the tone of this play is not naturalistic, perhaps you could have considered players placing chairs in varying positions as they spoke in order to give more variety of level and grouping. Once again more physicality between players during those ensemble moments would have helped, and then served to contrast more successfully with the moments of isolation of characters such as Wicksteed. However, there were many examples of well-timed moments, showing a good understanding of the playwright's intentions and I am sure that as your audience grew in number during the run, then the production would have gone from strength to strength.