

“CALENDAR GIRLS” - Dunstable Rep

Calendar Girls is a well-written play, and one which I always enjoy – but I did feel that the Rep version was lacking something – which I couldn't put my finger on. That said, I still had some good laughs and shed a few tears. A good set from Alan Goss was used extremely well throughout, I liked the way the centre opened out to accomplish the move to the moors. It was lit well and was of the usual high standard for a Rep production. I was a little disappointed with the props for the photo shoot – I felt there could have been more, to make it more colourful – but I liked the photos being shown on the screen – it somehow brought them to life.

I loved Dee Lovelock's controlling and bullish Chris – determined to do things her way, and bulldozing everyone else into doing what she wanted. There were moments when I felt I needed more compassion for Annie – as although some things were done as a vehicle for Chris's ego, I felt there was a loving, caring human being lurking in the background, and would have just liked that feeling brought more to the fore. That said, Dee gave a fine, well-studied performance.

Susan Young as Annie whose loss of her husband led to the calendar being used to raise money – gave us a restrained but often telling performance. I particularly liked the way she used the rug to get the smell of John – something that often occurs when a loss is experienced, which was very poignant.

Annalise Carter-Brown as the dowdy and down-trodden Ruth, showed us her accomplishment as an actress throughout, and she really shone in the nude scene with a wonderful smile of satisfaction that she had actually done it. I know some people didn't like her complete transformation at the end, after she'd dealt with Elaine (the beautician who was having an affair with her husband) – but I thought it was striking and made a real point.

I loved Barbara Morton's character – she had the odd very funny line, which she delivered well. We got the feel of the older more refined lady, who was willing to take a chance once in a while! I loved it when she told Lawrence that she had been his teacher, and the inevitable recoil from Lawrence!

Katy Elliott stood out for me – as the rather snooty Celia - she looked the part and acted it well, a good diverse portrayal.

Deborah Cheshire was Cora, the wayward daughter of the vicar, with an illegitimate daughter who might not approve of Mum getting her kit off! I thought she could have been a little more flippant at times, but I liked the scene where she told the others she'd heard from her lover, after he'd seen the calendar.

In this play the six ladies always seem to bond because of the fact they need to be really together to be able to undress in front of each other, and this was evident, although I sometimes felt some of the joie de vivre was missing, but they gave us a real diversity of characters.

Jo Collett was a very strong Marie, the WI president who disapproved of everything her ladies did – but eventually came round – her character contrasted well with the other ladies, and gave us another dimension to the piece.

It was good to see Josh Thompson in a more diffident role – as Lawrence the photographer, tasked with bringing the calendar to life, whilst Luke Murphy also showed an increasing progression of his acting skills, as the rather full-on sleazy Liam. I would perhaps have cast them the other way round, so perceptive of Angela to give them a chance to be different.

Phil Baker (he who can do no wrong in my eyes!!) acted the part of John with quiet humour, although I was not convinced by his make up in the later stages of his life – I am sure they were trying to achieve that rather grey look that comes with the treatment he was receiving, but under the lighting it looked more ghost-like. One part that didn't ring true was when Annie put the blanket over his knees, which he then tucked in, but then a few minutes later asked her to get the sunflower seeds out of his pocket because he was too weak – the blanket was probably an involuntary movement, but spoiled the poignancy of his obvious weakness.

The death scene is always a difficult one, but I didn't like John coming through the audience, for me it made him too human – whereas if he'd just sort of evaporated after the sadness of his final speech, to me it would have been more moving.

Chris's husband Rod was played by Kenton Harding – this is always a difficult part to fit into a cast of larger than life characters, but I felt he needed a little more positivity, and projection – as Rod had some amusing lines that didn't always have the emphasis they needed.

The cast was completed by Margaret Davis as Lady Cravenshire, a nice cameo role that Margaret did well, Julie Hanns as Elaine the beautician, who was having an affair with Ruth's husband, but who I felt would have reacted more when confronted by Ruth's exposure of her, and Rosemary O'Toole as the rather weird guest presenter for the WI – which lived up to some of the ladies I was confronted with in my days as a WI president!!

So, all in all I think Angela Goss directed a lovely play well, with some excellent performances, which is something we have come to expect from the Rep, but still I was not 100% blown away by the whole play, perhaps having seen a number of Calendar Girls this season I was looking for something completely over the top – however, Dee Lovelock, Katy Elliott and Barbara Morton were outstanding for me, and I enjoyed the evening, despite nearly melting in the unaccustomed heat!!

Thanks to the Rep for their hospitality – and I'm looking forward to next season, which looks to be a good one!

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