

## **“THE CHILDREN’S HOUR” – Dunstable Rep**

This was a different sort of play, very skillfully directed by Lucy O'Hare, with excellent scenery and technical capabilities.

Lucy has this faculty for getting the best out of her cast – and this was no exception. There were excellent characterisations from all the cast, but I was particularly taken by Olivia Ratcliffe, Kim Albone and Matt Flitton. I always feel it is a shame that I am unable to see both junior casts perform, so can only comment on those I saw – but I'm sure the other cast was just as good. The sets were both good, giving the cast room to move and also make the most of each setting – I loved the ticking of the clock as a background to the schoolroom – very atmospheric, as was the music used. A great deal of thought given to every aspect of this production, which always helps to make it a super experience for the audience.

Olivia Ratcliffe played Mary Tilford, the young girl who, because of her mental makeup seemed to always think that she was the scapegoat, and therefore wanted to inflict some form of reparation upon her teachers. This took the form of implying they were indulging in an UNNATURAL relationship, which in the days when the play was set would have been even more damning than it would be these days. I was very impressed by Olivia's understanding of the part and her undoubted acting prowess.

The play was quite long, but I would have loved to have seen Mary get her come-uppance when she was found out in her lies and manipulation of another girl to get the result she required. I loved her facial expressions, and the way she reacted to and against the adults – I'm sure the majority of the audience would have liked to have taken her to task!!

Rosalie the girl who was manipulated by Mary, because she'd taken a bracelet from another girl and feared punishment – was played by Megan Wagstaffe, I was very impressed by how much she has progressed since the last time I saw her in a role. We saw the happy soul she was basically, and the frightened girl she became when Mary got her claws into her. The two girls showed us the uneasy relationship they shared, with Rosalie being scared of Mary, but in some ways looking up to her because she could get such a gigantic reaction from the adults.

Karen Wright, the part-owner of the school was beautifully played by Kim Albone. Kim has a serenity about her which suited the part well, and whilst she expressed her sorrow you could see the pent-up grief as well. This contrasted well with the fiery character of Martha Dobie played by Annalise Carter-Brown. I liked the relationship between these two ladies, but at times I lost the dialogue from Martha when she was enraged. The final outcome was both shocking and in an awful way acceptable.

Matt Flitton in his first serious role as Joe Cardin, the doctor engaged to Karen, was really well-played. Matt is usually plays very full-on larger than life characters but this was a very serious, pulled back portrayal which he accomplished – creating a good dimensional threesome with the ladies.

Matt managed to get the look of a slightly careworn doctor coping with something beyond his comprehension, and he carried this through to the way he wore his clothes. Matt will always look elegant (well mostly anyway!), but there was a slightly hunched inward feel to his demeanour which suited the part. I thought Rona Cracknell was arresting as Lily Mortar, Martha's Aunt. She gave us the slightly dreamy quality of an older actress, whilst still retaining some of the fire for her profession which she was trying to pass on to the children, and her unworldliness in not acknowledging what was happening to her niece, and how her intervention might have helped the situation.

Anne Blow as Amelia Tilford, the rather confused elderly grandmother of the protagonist Mary, showed her character's wish to believe her granddaughter, followed by her indecision, then need to make reparation to Karen and Martha once Mary had confessed to the truth. I also liked Julie Hanns as Agatha, Mrs Tilford's housekeeper. She obviously understood Mary and her manipulation of people, but wasn't prepared to do too much about it.

Finally we have the cast of children – Jaida Simms, India Keane, Ella Couldridge, Isabel Duffy and Kaitlin Lewis, who interacted beautifully, always keeping their characters going, and reacting to the situations around them – all precocious in their portrayals, whilst retaining the innocence of children. Well done to them all. The characters and their relationships were complex, and this was conveyed excellently by the cast. The costumes were all very suitable – the girls uniforms looked extremely smart and typical of the time – whilst the two older ladies wore attractive but suitable costumes, with Rona's hair being a work of art and lovely to look at, and Anne's wig giving her face a whole different look. I must just mention Stuart Grey as the Grocery Boy – a very small part, but he played it well, getting plenty of expression into the few lines he had. I also loved the bows – the tableaux with just the lights indicating each cast member or group was exactly right – thanks Lucy!!

All in all an excellent evening's entertainment from an unusual play with the stellar cast. Seeing the relationships and manipulations being woven throughout really got to the heart of the piece, and although I am aware some people found it banal and not strictly entertainment (from some of the comments I heard) – I always feel you need to take these things at face value and read into it what you will, whilst appreciating the excellent acting skills that have been brought to play by the insight of an extremely good Director. ***Nova Horley***