

WHARFEDALE FESTIVAL OF THEATRE 2014-2015:
WRITTEN ASSESSMENT

Play: *London Suite*

Entrant: **Weeton & Huby Players**

Venue: **Almscliffe Hall, Huby**

Performance seen: **21.11.2014**

1. Introduction

Though very welcome, it seemed very strange when I was booking seats for *London Suite* to be told that two performances were sold out, when in the not-too-distant past I was party to discussions as to whether your group might fold altogether as a society or alternatively join forces with another group in the area. Thank goodness neither option was taken up as, in a relatively short time, you have managed to grow in strength. That growth has involved bringing along a new approach to performance as well as keeping on board your old faithfuls, who now (a) trust you with your productions whether played in the round or on the stage, and (b) don't worry about knowing the play or not.

Many congratulations on your reversal of fortunes and long may this growth and development continue.

2. Choice of Play

London Suite proved to be an excellent choice for your society as could be seen from its ensemble playing. Neil Simon's plays are not the easiest to perform and I feel that, of his three plays of this type, this one is possibly the hardest, as it seems less obviously humorous than *Plaza Suite* or *California Suite*.

3. Stage Presentation

This heading includes stage setting, props, lighting, sound, costumes and make-up.

Setting, Design, etc

It was very sensible to choose to play this in the round, as this gives the audience a greater sense of involvement.

I thought your design worked well. Furnishings and props were well chosen, both in colour in practicality of movement. Lighting was good, though perhaps a little more variation in lounge or bedroom to give variety depending on play-let. Perhaps working bedside lamps and a working lamp in the lounge would have helped achieve this. Possibly a change of drinks and perhaps a floral arrangement would have defined each play-let better. Small props were well chosen and well used, and music and sound effects were well chosen and well operated. Well done.

Costumes were good, both for colour co-ordination and wearability.

4. **Production**

This heading includes interpretation of the spirit and meaning of the play, teamwork, general pace and variation in tempo, grouping and movement, making of points, and sense of climax. It is also under this heading that an assessor takes account of the greater difficulty involved in tackling a production with a large cast.

I will look at each play-let individually in due course but first I will make the general comment that I felt you had chosen a great team of actors and managed to assure us from the first play-let that there was great strength and discipline from them. This enabled your audience to settle back, relax, and enjoy the production.

There are, however, some small general points that could have perhaps been worked on a bit more. I did worry that at times sight-lines for some of the audience may have proved a bit difficult – ie the chair in the lounge and the distance from seating behind the bed, which was a long way from scenes in the lounge. Having directed a few plays myself in the round I know at times you are going to mask players, and this cannot be helped since any irritation from this can only be noticed by the director when the play is in performance with a full house. This was not a major inconvenience but should always be in the director's mind in rehearsal.

I did notice that in the play-lets *Going Home* and *The Man On The Floor* you chose to play in English accents as opposed to American and I feel that, particularly with Neil Simon's plays, some of the dialogue does tend to work better if delivered with American accents. But if the actors are not comfortable

with American it is better to stick to English accents, as you did.

Another minor point is that a couple of your actors did “clock” the audience from time to time. Again as a director you can only stop this in performance. However, it is worth mentioning to the actors concerned that this is something they should not do. However, out of nine actors, some of whom were new to acting and/or to playing in the round, your cast as a whole should be congratulated on avoiding this.

4. **Acting**

This heading includes characterisation, audibility of speech, variation in tone, appropriateness of emphasis, gesture and movement.

Settling Accounts

This is not an easy play to open with as it is certainly full on, both in language and as a test of ability. This was well directed and a *tour de force* by both actors, who played off each others’ strengths. It was hard to believe that the actor playing Brian was completely new to the stage. I think that vocally perhaps a little more variation in volume would have worked better but the humour was well delivered to the audience and well responded to by the audience. My congratulations to both actors on their portrayals of these characters.

Going Home

This is another two-hander and a very moving piece at times. I did feel this would have played better with American accents for among the pathos there was certainly more of Simon’s Bronx humour, both from mother and daughter. However, this was nicely paced and sensitively played by both actresses, and it still worked well even with English accents.

Diana and Sidney

This play-let, of course, brings back the pair from *California Suite* so it’s nice to compare the two scenarios. Diana is the English diva but residing in Los Angeles and plays the *grande dame*. This was a very good performance from this actress – lots of variation vocally, both in tone and pace, and very believable portrayal and empathy with Sidney. Sidney is

perhaps one of the most complex male characters in the quartet and was well served by this actor, particularly in a couple of very moving sections. I did feel perhaps a little more vitriolic banter would have given Sidney more variation but the pairing worked well. It proved a welcome back to the stage for Diana - perhaps a little over-use of arm gestures as sometimes less is more, but I am nit-picking. Grace was a nice performance as the English PA and of course would have been a good contrast with the character of Lauren in *Going Home* had that play-let been played with American accents.

The Man On The Floor

This play-let as a finale to the evening is Neil Simon full throttle and like the last play in *Plaza Suite* it is out-and-out farce. This was extremely well directed. I appreciate you played it as an English couple living in Los Angeles, but I do wish that Mark and Annie had played this in American accents because, as good as their portrayals were, there was much more of Simon's Jewish American humour to this piece than English accents could bring out. Mrs Sitgood, duty manager – this was a nice performance, but it would have been a brilliant contrast to Mrs Semple had the second play-let been played with American accents. Dr McMerlin – a very believable performance from this actor; and the Bellman – a very confident and well judged performance from this young actor who has lots of potential for the future. Well done.

5. Theatrical Attainment

This heading covers the general impression made by the performance as a whole, the type of play chosen, its dramatic merit, the suitability of the cast, the originality and effort shown in the performance and the standard achieved.

This evening's plays were well received by the audience the night I was there - and rightly so for the obvious enjoyment you gave us all. As I said at the beginning, it was a pleasure to see you back playing to full houses, and long may it continue.

Thank you for an enjoyable evening.

30.11.2014

(Malcolm Pinder)