Blizzard of Blood

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Information

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Society
Bispham Castaways
Venue
Holy Family Catholic Church
Type of Production
Play
Director
Debbie Flavell

Bispham Castaways
Blizzard of Blood
By Belladonna Mysteries
Directed by Debbie Flavell

There is something rather wonderful about returning to a theatre company you have reviewed before and discovering that the things you admired previously are still firmly at its heart, while other aspects have clearly grown and developed.

Bispham Castaways is a company that wears its name rather well. A cast of "castaways", perhaps, but more

importantly a group that welcomes people in, embraces difference and creates a genuine sense of community. That was something I commented on when I last visited the company, and returning for Blizzard of Blood only strengthened that impression.

This was not simply a play. It was an evening of food, interrogation, clues, red herrings, suspicious characters, laughter and, ultimately, murder.

And I loved it.

From the moment we arrived, there was a personal warmth to the evening. Director Debbie Flavell greeted me at the door and immediately recognised me, before escorting us to our table. The room was arranged in cabaret style, with long tables seating six, and it was pleasing to see the hall completely full. There is something particularly encouraging about seeing a community theatre production supported so enthusiastically by its local audience.

Our table was joined by four ladies who were clearly seasoned murder mystery enthusiasts. I suspect I had rather optimistically assumed I might be the Poirot of the evening. I was very quickly put in my place.

Before the mystery began, we were given a quiz to complete as a team. It was a simple but effective way of getting strangers around the table talking and working together. The only criticism I would make here is that the typography made the quiz unnecessarily difficult to read

in places. A slightly cleaner, more accessible design would have given it a more polished feel.

Food had also been pre-ordered, which was a lovely personal touch. As someone who can be rather particular about meat, my request for something other than hotpot was met with a huge jacket potato, and it was delicious and extremely well portioned. Later came pudding, with apple pie proving to be a universal success. The food was well organised and clearly added to the experience, although collecting it did temporarily remove us from the action at a point when we could otherwise have been questioning the characters.

Then came the mystery.

I have said before that I love a good murder mystery, and Blizzard of Blood certainly gave me plenty to get my teeth into. The writing, by Belladonna Mysteries, was clever, intricate and, importantly, kept us guessing. Characters revealed fragments of their histories, connections slowly emerged and red herrings were carefully scattered throughout the story.

I was completely thrown off the scent.
My table, however, were having none of my theories and eventually cracked the case. Against my vote, I should add. I was wrong. They were right. I shall be reviewing their membership of the detective agency accordingly.

The eventual reveal worked because the various strands of the story came together and the links between the characters became clear. It was a satisfying conclusion to

a mystery that had managed to keep the audience engaged throughout.

I was particularly impressed to discover afterwards that Belladonna Mysteries is actually the pen name of Susan Hope, who also appeared in the production as Breeze. Having already been impressed by the writing, discovering that it had come from within the company made it even more satisfying. It is another example of what makes Bispham Castaways special. The company is not simply providing a place for people to perform. It is embracing the talents of its members and allowing those talents to contribute to the wider creative life of the group.

The audience interaction was, for me, the real triumph of the evening.

During the breaks, the cast came out among the tables and remained completely in character while we interrogated them. This was not simply a case of actors walking around repeating a few lines. Characters had their own histories, motivations and little side stories. They responded to questions, interacted with the audience and continued to exist within the world of the play.

That is exactly what an immersive experience should do.

I particularly enjoyed seeing the characters weave between the tables rather than simply performing everything from the stage. My own table became increasingly invested in the investigation, demanding to know why characters had said certain things, where they

had been and whether they had killed the victim. The cast never broke character.
At one point, one performer was still happily discussing the mystery with our table when the rest of the cast had been called backstage. A member of the crew approached and addressed the performer by their character name, explaining that their husband required their assistance. It was a tiny moment, but an incredibly clever one. It maintained the illusion rather than suddenly snapping us back into reality with a simple "you need to go backstage".

That attention to detail made the experience.
It was also noticeable that the performers' acting skills and stage presence have developed since my previous visit. Whether this is the result of increased performance experience, direction, or simply confidence, there was a greater sense of assurance across the cast.

Susan Hope as Breeze was completely immersed in the role. Her vocal tone and accent suited the character beautifully, creating a woman who appeared to possess a lifetime of history and secrets. Her confrontation with Baldassario also produced one of the evening's most memorable moments.

The slap.

I have seen stage slaps before. This was not one of them.

Susan slapped Graham Wilcock with such commitment that the entire room heard it. Graham deserves

enormous credit for taking it, because there was nothing particularly delicate about it. It was a wonderfully brutal moment of theatrical realism, and one which certainly got a reaction from the audience.
There was a wider commitment to physicality throughout the production, with confrontations involving plenty of pushing and poking. At times I found myself wondering whether the cast would emerge from the run with a few bruises to show for their commitment. It certainly demonstrated how seriously the performers had embraced the world of the play.

The use of real props was another interesting directorial choice. Characters actually drank when they were supposed to be drinking, which added another layer of realism. I did, however, find myself slightly less comfortable with the decision to use real candles. In a small performance space with a considerable amount of fabric and scenery, live flames introduce an unnecessary safety concern. Thankfully the evening remained a murder mystery rather than becoming an actual fire investigation.

Graham Wilcock as Baldassario commanded the stage. His ability to switch between the charismatic cult leader and the more calculating con man gave the character a strong presence.

Amanda Knapp's Starshine was, for me, the biggest improvement from my previous visit. I have seen Amanda perform several times, but here I genuinely believed she was Starshine. Her body language, facial expressions

and vocal choices combined to create a fully realised character.

Helen Findlay initially entered with a very high-pitched vocal quality which made some of her dialogue difficult to follow. Once she settled into the role, however, this became much clearer and she really embraced Patchouli. Her ability to switch between the apparently clairvoyant character and the con artist was particularly effective, as was her relationship with Graham's character.

John Robinson brought his familiar deep northern delivery to Simeon. He created another believable character, although having seen John in a similar role previously, I would be interested to see him challenged with something completely different next time.

Katy Randall gave a confident performance as Harmony. Her accent and vocal choices helped take me away from Katy and into the world of the character, while the sheer amount of dialogue required was considerable. Impressively, Hayley Price was there ready with the prompt, but she was never needed.

Conor James and Taylor Clark as the newlyweds Michael and Melody, arrived in matching plaid outfits which perfectly captured the slightly cheesy happiness of newlywed life. Conor's projection was strong, and he deserves additional credit for his later appearance in little more than a towel.
Taylor's character was subsequently poisoned, and the effect was remarkably convincing. I still have no idea how

the production achieved the foaming-at-the-mouth effect, but it was certainly effective. One practical observation would be that Taylor's costume was perhaps a little too revealing for the demands of the role. Having to repeatedly adjust or cover her costume risks distracting the performer from the character and the scene.

There were also some wonderfully silly moments which demonstrated that the production understood its own sense of fun. Outside the hotel, we were repeatedly told that a blizzard was raging. Every time the door opened, someone threw fake snow into the scene. The first time it was amusing. By the third, fourth and fifth time it became increasingly ridiculous, which I suspect was exactly the point.

And then there was the chicken.

The cast will know.

I will say no more.

Behind the scenes, the production was supported by a hard-working technical team. Tyler Mercer must have developed enormous biceps after the number of times he opened and closed those curtains, while Ian Dodd worked hard on the scene changes, including one particularly impressive recovery after a slight issue with some falling cutlery.

Ian Fleetwood, Cordy Jones and Alan Westhead provided a solid technical foundation. The set created a believable lounge environment within what is, ultimately, a small

church hall. That should not be underestimated. The venue itself will never provide the theatrical grandeur of a traditional theatre, but that is hardly the fault of a community charity operating within the resources available to it. What matters is what the company manages to create within those limitations, and the set successfully transported us into the world of the story.

There were, however, a few technical areas that could be developed further.

The opening sound levels were initially a little high and pitched, although this was identified and corrected almost immediately. That was handled professionally.

Lighting is an area where I would particularly encourage the company to continue developing. Regular readers will know that lighting is something I pay close attention to, and while I fully appreciate the financial realities of community theatre, there is enormous potential for lighting to elevate productions even further. The simple washes used throughout worked, and the red lighting for one scene was effective, but there were also missed cues. At one point a character operated a light switch on stage without the expected lighting change occurring. Moments like that can unfortunately remind an audience that they are watching a performance rather than living within the world of the story.

The scene changes were perhaps the biggest interruption to the theatrical flow. On several occasions the curtains closed, the stage went into blackout and the audience waited while scenery was moved. The kitchen

sequence particularly highlighted this. A small stage extension was pushed forward, the kitchen scene played, the lights went down and the extension was then pushed back before the main action resumed.

For an interactive murder mystery, where audience engagement is so important, this felt unnecessarily clunky.

I would be tempted to explore a more theatrical solution. Keep the curtains open. Freeze the action in a carefully constructed tableau. Have the kitchen already established or allow the action to shift into it seamlessly, play the scene and return to the main action. It would maintain momentum, reduce the opportunities for the audience to drift into conversation and, importantly, demonstrate the performers' ability to hold a freeze and sustain the theatrical world.

The opening announcement could also be sharper. As I noted previously, this is an important moment for setting the atmosphere. On this occasion the announcement felt too long, and one of the voices was difficult to understand. Telling an audience that there are "two minutes until curtain" only for the audience to then begin chatting rather undermines the anticipation that has just been created. In a murder mystery, suspense is everything. A short, clear announcement followed almost immediately by the start of the action would create far more impact.

The role of host also has considerable potential. John Flavell did a good job, but I felt the role could be much

bigger and more professional. Rather than simply hosting from the side of the stage with a microphone, an event like this would benefit enormously from a dedicated MC or narrator who genuinely takes ownership of the evening. Someone to welcome the audience, explain the rules, build the suspense, control the interrogation sections and guide the audience through the various stages of the mystery. The ingredients are already there. They simply need someone to bring them together.

But these observations should not overshadow what was, ultimately, a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

The greatest success of Blizzard of Blood was not the murder itself. It was the community surrounding it.

Seeing the cast remain in character while talking to audience members was wonderful. Seeing tables of strangers become teams of detectives was even better. And seeing the cast return to the stage at the end, only to be presented with a card for Debbie Flavell and bring their director on stage, was genuinely touching.

Debbie was visibly emotional, and understandably so. There was a real sense of appreciation and affection between the cast and their director.

Then, after the performance, came the hugs, smiles and congratulations. Friends, parents, relatives, cast and crew all mingling together. Nobody seemed in a rush to leave. Everyone was smiling.

That is amateur dramatics at its very best.

Bispham Castaways may not have the biggest venue, the largest budget or the most sophisticated technical equipment, but they possess something which cannot be bought. They have a genuine community spirit. They create a place where people can perform, contribute, be themselves and support one another.

And having now experienced that twice, I can say with some confidence that it is not just something written in a programme or suggested by a society's name. It is something you can actually feel in the room.

I arrived expecting a murder mystery.

I left with a full stomach, a wrong accusation, a head full of clues and a rather full heart.
And, despite my table's obvious superiority as detectives, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

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