

The Adjudication

a monologue

by

David Muncaster

Thank you. Thank you for that warm reception, and a particular thank you to Pat for inviting me to adjudicate at this festival. To be back here in <local place> is just like coming home to me because this is where I spent my childhood. Yes, I am a local lad. In fact, it is on this very stage (*substitute close to this very stage if appropriate*) that I made my acting début.

I remember it as if it were yesterday: a school production of Peer Gynt and I was determined to get the lead. Every night I lay in my bed with a torch under the covers and read and re-read the script from start to finish. Come the day of the audition I knew not only all of Peer Gynt's lines but *every* character's lines. I put all of my heart in to that audition but the day turned out to be one which I look back on as a character building day rather than a happy one: I didn't get the part.

Sadly, for me anyway, the honour of playing the lead role went to Frank Whittington, a popular boy in the same year as me. Young Frank was well known and well liked throughout the school as was his father, Mr Whittington, a teacher at the school: the drama teacher, in fact, and the director of that school production of Peer Gynt.

Of course, I am not suggesting that young Frank Whittington didn't get the part on merit. He played it very well and fully deserved the award for Best Performance by a Junior at that year's festival. A shame then, that he didn't get the award in the end.

Anyway, that was all a very long time ago and it is time to come back to the present and for me to talk about the production that we have all just seen performed by <local group> and directed by Frank Whittington. Hello there, Frank. Oh the irony.

The National Guild of Dramatic Adjudicators requires that I begin my remarks with a few words on the choice of play; and what a choice Frank had! The play festival has a long and distinguished tradition in the world of amateur theatre. Whilst there is plenty of competition from cinema, television and, these days, social media, the play festival remains ever popular. The popularity of the festival means that there is no shortage of scripts written by talented, professional playwrights that cover just about any scenario one can imagine. Whether you are looking for a comedy, a tragedy, a farce or a thriller: whether you have a large cast, a small cast, a young cast or an old cast, there is a plethora of fantastic scripts out there to choose from. It is surprising then, one might even say, brave, that Frank chose to produce a play that he had written himself.

One advantage, however, of writing the play oneself is that one can write it specifically for the cast available. When I received Frank's script in the post I noticed that the main characters are a young, recently married couple in their early twenties. I assumed, therefore, that Frank was lucky enough to have a least one pair of actors that would fit the bill. It is with some surprise, therefore, that, once the actors took to the stage, I realised that Paul Greenbank, playing the part of the young husband, is actually nearer to his early sixties than his early twenties. Though I will concede that the average age of the couple is brought closer to the characters' ages by the actress playing the wife, Rebecca Smith, whose school uniform indicates, I believe, a lack of opportunity to change out of her uniform due to some after school activity rather than a conscious costume choice.

Speaking of costume choices, it is perhaps now appropriate for me to speak about the performances in more detail. Paul has made some attempt to disguise his actual age by choosing a costume that a young man in his early twenties might choose to wear. Or, at least, might have chosen to wear around forty years ago. Indeed, I suspect that Paul's costume tonight consisted of his own clothes dragged from the back of the wardrobe for one last appearance. His round collared floral shirt and lilac flares must have made Paul quite the dandy in the 1970s and I suppose that I should congratulate him for still being able to fit into them, though this praise would have been more deserving had he been capable of fastening the trousers and pulling up the fly.

As the play begins it is clear that not all is well in this marriage: something has come between this pair of newly weds. Initially, this is the sofa but it soon escalates to the coffee table, the kitchen counter or any convenient piece of scenery until Rebecca is virtually in the wings. Her attempts to put some distance between herself and her husband really do seem to go beyond the requirements of the script and I wonder if there has been some incident in rehearsals that we don't know about. Assuming that there have been any rehearsals, of course.

The atmosphere is decidedly awkward when Paul's character brings up the subject of starting a family. As he attempts to whisper sweet nothings into his wife's ear, an endeavour made all the more difficult by the twelve foot flat that separates them, we see the relief on his wife's face when her phone rings. For a moment I wondered if there had been a change to the script since I had read it and whether Frank had taken a decision to dabble in experimental theatre because the telephone call did not seem to fit in with the storyline. However, it soon became apparent that Rebecca had, in fact, stepped out of character and that this call was not part of the play.

We are, though, indebted to Rebecca for providing us with an insight into her life as certain facts were laid before us. For example: Luke is a "bit of a knob but still well fit"; Emma will "do it with anyone"; and Mr Price can "go and do something to himself" which suggests that he is a bit of a contortionist as well as a teacher who is presumptuous to the extent of requiring homework to be in on time. I have to say that, even though Paul attempted to keep things going by filling in the silences in Rebecca's telephone conversation with his character's dialogue, I feel that we had drifted from the storyline somewhat, and the play needed something to get us back on track. Perhaps this would come with the arrival of his parents.

Or perhaps not. One of the problems that we all have in amateur theatre is finding actors to play members of the same family who have some similarity in physical appearance. However, this was not the problem here. No one can argue about the physical similarities between Paul and the actor playing his father. In fact, I'd be amazed if the similarity wasn't striking given that they are identical twins. Paul's father was played by Tom, the younger of the twins, I believe.

What we never did find out is whether there is any similarity in looks between Paul and the actress playing his mother. This is due to the fact that the actress, unfortunately, never made it onto the stage. Very enterprising of Tom, in the circumstances, to endeavour to play the roles of not only Paul's father but his mother too. This is, no doubt, what inspired Paul to compensate for the fact that by now Rebecca was nowhere to be seen by playing the part of the wife as well as the husband.

Two men in their sixties playing a fifty something and a twenty something of each gender is a challenge to which the actors were somehow managing to rise until the sudden appearance of Rebecca who appeared back on the stage at a speed that suggested that she had been propelled there by a none too gentle push. Some confusion as Paul naturally assumed that his wife was back on stage when Rebecca started speaking the lines of her own mother-in-law, the director having obviously decided, given his limited resources, that this was the more important role to be filled.

By some miracle things actually started to make sense for a short period until all the action on the stage came to an abrupt halt as the actors appeared to be waiting for something to happen. Was this the 'Oh shit' that emanated from the wings? No, this was just a curse from the director who had realised what was missing. We then heard 'Play the effect, play the bloody effect', before that same voice shouted, 'Ding, dong'. When I read the script I hadn't expected Paul's line 'Oh, there's someone at the door' to get the laugh that it, did but then, comedy is all about timing.

When Paul opened the door he probably didn't expect to see his director standing there and he

seemed a little lost for words until the silence was filled by Rebecca demanding to know where Adam was: the answer to this query apparently being wherever the hell Margaret is. I decided to refer to my programme as I was starting to get a little lost. At this point in the play, all the characters are on the stage. We have the young couple played by Paul and Rebecca, albeit that Rebecca's role is now being played by Paul; Paul's parents, both of whom were played by Tom until Rebecca took over the role of her own mother-in-law; and Rebecca's brother who is being played by the director.

Having got that all straight in my head I prepared myself for the climax of the play. What happened on stage differed from the script in a number of quite important ways and it is perhaps prudent that I should explain those differences to the audience. When Paul pointed to the director and declared 'He is not my brother' he was saying Rebecca's line, the point of the play being that she had committed an act of bigamy by marrying Paul because she was already married to a character that she had, until now, pretended was her brother. Tom had obviously forgotten that Paul was now Rebecca and leapt in to assure him that everyone in the village knows that they are brothers and that Paul is in no way related to the director. To try to resolve the confusion, Rebecca reverted to her own character and repeated the line, pointing to the director and saying 'He is not my brother'. Unfortunately this just confused Tom even further and he muttered something about the director, Frank, being Rebecca's dad.

By now we have left the script well behind and we are watching real drama on the stage. Rebecca, at first, laughs at Tom saying 'Frank's not my dad' but the awkward silence that followed hinted at what was to come. Indeed, the audience were on the edge of their seat when Frank finally delivered his unscripted line, 'We were waiting until you finished your exams. We were going to tell you'. Suddenly things have got interesting but sadly, for us, the story ends there. An audience member, presumably Rebecca's real life mother took Rebecca off to the wings and her cries were drowned out by the sound man finally waking up and playing the closing music.

We've had everything tonight: high drama, pathos, comedy, farce and I'm not even talking about the play. Frank, you missed out on winning an award all those years ago when we were at school together but I'm about to put that right. Your play was dreadful. The acting was appalling, the direction terrible. The special effects and costumes were dire. There was nothing in tonight's performance that warrants a single point on my adjudication sheet but I've never enjoyed myself more. Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in a round of applause and Frank, please make your way to the podium to receive the adjudicator's special award for outstanding achievement.