

A REVIEW OF THE GRAYSHOTT STAGERS PRODUCTION OF "ACORN ANTIQUES"

25TH TO 28TH MAY 2016

I wonder if, like me, you can remember those wonderfully entertaining weekly TV send-ups in the mid-1980s under the collective heading "Victoria Wood – As seen on TV"? Miss Wood developed one of these send-ups into a musical play - and "Acorn Antiques" was born! When it hit the West End in 2005, it had a sell-out season, earning several Olivier Award nominations, and featured Julie Walters and Celia Imrie in the starring roles of Mrs Overall and Miss Babs. At that time, Quentin Letts of the Daily Mail reported that "Acorn Antiques could well become a cult hit" – and many people now believe it has! Its revival the following year resulted in a successful UK tour with a slimmer version of the overly lengthy original.

Whether it's because of a love for Miss Wood herself, who met a sad and premature death recently, or a pleasure in recounting the TV sketches that she wrote, the Stagers recent production also proved immensely popular at the box office

Essentially, the show is a satire on what Miss Wood saw as second-rate TV soaps – with digs at ATV's "Crossroads" and the radio soap "Waggoners Walk", but she also grabbed the opportunity to take a swipe or two at more current soaps, particularly "Eastenders" and "Coronation Street". "Acorn Antiques" typifies Miss Wood's northern humour, mixed with a disregard for political correctness and social sensitivity. The script is alive with witty one liners and sexual innuendoes, but at the same time it shows the broad range of her talent. It certainly didn't let my attention wander!

The storyline centres around the staff of an antique shop in the fictional English town of Manchesterford, and the script has been carefully crafted so that every character has a special individuality.

Underpinning the whole show is Mrs Overall, the cleaner of Acorn Antiques, who is later revealed as the mother of Miss Babs, Miss Berta, and Miss Bonnie. "Mrs O" believes that all problems can be solved by a nice cup of tea, a macaroon and an anecdote! In this challenging and demanding role, Laura Musco gave a clearly defined performance laced with an authentic "brummy" accent that she maintained throughout the show.

Thrusting herself on any passing male, Susie Dean gave an hilarious performance as Miss Babs, the haughty and sexually oppressed co-owner of Acorn Antiques. Making the most of her excellent acting and comedy skills she struck up an immediate rapport with the audience. The business with the phone that failed to ring, and then rung when answered, was a real hoot!

As Miss Berta, the younger twin sister of Miss Babs and another co-owner of Acorn Antiques, Rachel Perkins sparkled as the starry-eyed and smilingly desperate fiancée of Mr Clifford who had lost his memory and couldn't remember that they were engaged. She held the audience throughout. John Dowsett's portrayal of Mr Clifford as stolid and reliable was entirely believable.

As participants in the government's Pitiful Adolescent Scheme, Mimi (Helen Coyte) and Hugh (Thomas Edser) were given work experience at Acorn Antiques. Initially, they appeared as surly, grungy youths. Helen's portrayal was excellent, and Hugh was particularly amusing when, later on, they were both transformed into upper class antique experts.

The storyline then hinges on a bid by the assertive and ruthless Miss Bonnie, the owner of an evil global coffee-shop chain, "The Guilty Bean", to force Acorn Antiques out of existence. Faced with financial woes and family secrets, Miss Babs and Miss Bertha borrow money through Tony (Douglas McLeod), a loan shark with no feelings and no conscience. Douglas managed to maintain just the right amount of "slime" throughout. Miss Bonnie was initially scheming and devious (she even fires Mrs Overall after finding out that she is her mother), but later softens and becomes part of the family business. The character therefore requires considerable acting ability, and was portrayed very successfully by Kim Seymour.

The plot is punctuated throughout by partners Mr Watkins (Bernard Whelan) and Derek (Paul Bailey), a couple of regular and flamboyant customers at Acorn Antiques, who keep their feelings hidden from each other, but eventually sing of their undying love.

The show ends with the triumphant return of Mrs Overall, a windfall, and the union of Miss Bertha and Mr Clifford. At last, all is well in Manchesterford!

It was pleasure to see both regular and new faces in the cast, and reliable support in smaller roles was given by Mary Coyte, Steve Musco, Jennifer Charters, John Hilder, Mary Lou-Knox, Pauline Harries, Ruth McLeod, Sue Tytler, Caroline Thompson, and Peter Sillick.

The husband and wife production team of Andrew and Mandy Boughton deserve great credit for successfully overcoming the challenges of a small stage, and for providing some lively and entertaining routines, backed up by colourful and imaginative costumes and sets that enhanced the visual enjoyment. And as we have come to expect from the Stagers, the back stage team, with its numerous roles, excelled.

Under the able direction of Rob Miller, the small team of musicians enlivened the tunefully toe-tapping songs and contributed significantly to the evenings pleasure.

It must have taken tremendous time and effort by all concerned to pull this show together. The final result was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, and I left feeling uplifted and with a sense of admiration for the obvious enthusiasm and enjoyment that had been radiated from the stage.

Peter Jones