

A MURDER IS ANNOUNCED - CHIPPERFIELD THEATRE GROUP

Thanks to an inspired (or perhaps unduly perilous) piece of scheduling, Chipperfield Theatre Group's latest offering, *A Murder Is Announced*, was performed, somewhat eerily, on the day it was set - Friday 13th. Maybe this double dose of bad luck was why, at the outset at least, the play seemed unremarkable - bland characters, forced dialogue and with only the merest hint of the intrigue that was to follow. Certainly, the intervention of Wendy Marchant was timely. On hand to bolster proceedings with her bolshie east European housekeeper complete with comedy accent and cold war paranoia. Her cameos were welcome relief from the rather staid opening.

One of the principal flaws of the play was the set piece murder which concluded the first Act. An effort was made to build up some suspense as the characters speculated on a newspaper advert which proclaimed that a murder was to take place on the aforementioned date. And everything was going to plan - the lights went out - a shot rang out and we waited to see which of those gathered had bitten the dust. But when the lights went on we discovered it was none of them. Instead it was Neil Stanton making his debut as a hitherto unseen intruder. I guess the poor guy has to start somewhere but as murders go it was a terrible anti climax.

As always however, whatever the limitations of the play itself, there were some impressive performances with all eyes on Jennifer Heusen as keen eyed Saga sleuth Miss Marple. It was a role that she performed with customary aplomb; lending the busy biddy an endearing quality that might have been lost had the actress not done well to curb her natural comic flair. It was obviously a challenge to portray older characters with a cast who aren't ordinarily queuing up for free bus passes but Ann Pinkus held things together magnificently. Lyn Hug had possibly the toughest role but I warmed to her portrayal of Bunny realising, belatedly, that my irritation at her nervous mannerisms and innocent blether was very much in context. But evidently someone else must have found her character similarly annoying because she was bumped off midway through the second half.

This murder doubled the body count and was the one that really sparked the audience's interest. The whodunit was then played out in traditional fashion - clues aplenty, everybody implicated, false leads and finally Miss Marple's pièce de résistance - apprehending the one person who we were lead to believe was the target for the killing that had gone before. After my initial reservations, the finale was redemption of sorts for the play and reward for the efforts of this talented troupe who had put in the hard yards. Maybe it's a sign of the times that one murder just isn't enough these days!

Jason Cox