

AMATEUR THEATRE REVIEW: And Then There Were None – Ashton Hayes Theatre Club, Chester.

I had the pleasure of watching Ashton Hayes Theatre Club's production, 'And Then There Were None' at Tarvin Community Centre, in Chester. Directed by the award-winning Yvette Owen, this production had the audience laughing and sitting on the edge of their seats, watching and waiting for the murders to start.

'And Then There Were None' was the most popular and bestselling crime novel of all time. First published on 6th November 1939 and written by the Queen of Crime herself, Agatha Christie. Times change, but our love of a good murder mystery does not. This brilliant piece of writing was initially adapted for the stage by the lady herself. A well-told story doesn't lose its power to capture the imagination and Agatha Christie's work continues to be enjoyed decades later. I was really looking forward to seeing how this classic whodunnit could be adapted for the stage and presented in front of a modern audience.

This was a gripping mystery about ten strangers invited to a remote island under false pretences, their mysterious host accuses each guest of murder, and one by one, they fall prey. Things quickly take an unexpected turn when the gramophone plays 'The Swan Song' after dinner announcing and accusing each and every one of a crime, with each crime leading to a murder, in which justice was



never served. Trapped with no escape, the suspense builds as trust erodes and secrets unravel. This dramatisation required a stellar cast to do the work justice and the audience was not disappointed. The set was exceptional and brilliantly designed, using one room for the whole play. There was real attention to detail in the room with realistic props and a mixture of period furniture matching the era, setting the scene well. Yvette's design and vision really captivated the audience, allowing them



to fully immerse themselves into the world of Agatha Christie, while forgetting they were in a community hall. The production's biggest selling point is that it is devotedly put together with a huge sense of community and commitment. Ashton Hayes Theatre Club had a great team working behind the scenes, having to clear up every night before resetting for the audience the following evening. This group truly had a sense of community and dedication to the arts even donating their set after the production to support other theatre groups.

The pictures around the stage were one of the highlights to the production and added a little unique touch. Yvette designed and created the pictures, representing the crimes of each character with the production. Justice for the Judge, the soldiers in the war for the General and the elderly lady for the Rogers. Each picture was showcased using light at the beginning of the production and a second time with a red light after each death, allowing the audience to really appreciate the significance of the set, bringing it to life.



'Ten Little Soldiers' is a dark nursery rhyme that serves as a chilling prelude to the events. The poem mirrors the systematic and inevitable deaths of the characters in the novel, emphasising the theme of inescapable fate. I had a peripheral eye constantly watching the soldier figures on the back table, knowing that one would suspiciously disappear after each death. Still head scratching, I have no idea how this was achieved in this production.

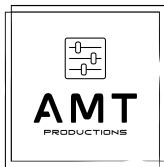
'Ten little soldier boys went out to dine; One choked his little self and then there were Nine'. First one to die, Anthony Marston played by (Dan Aynsley) the indulged reckless young man. This character was fiery and quick tempered, they said lead with your best foot forward and if someone had to die first it was this man. His acting in the death scene was superb and had the audience captivated and on the edge of their seat wondering who did the murder.

'Nine little Soldier Boys sat up very late; One overslept himself and then there were eight'. Mrs Rogers played by (Clare Bolton) was very natural on stage as the new maid. Clare used her voice and posture to successfully show the social status of the character.



'Eight little Soldier Boys travelling in Devon; One said he'd stay there and then there were seven'. General Mackenzie, played by (Gary Jones) was the third one to die, he had a solitary feel about him which was right for this character.

'Seven little Soldier Boys chopping up sticks; One chopped himself in halves and then there were six'. The fourth victim was Mr Rogers the butler played by (Jac Wardle) giving a great performance, his well maintained demeanour throughout was excellent. Jac covered a scene transition very well as the cast needed to change, he created a dark atmosphere through his silence as no words were



needed. You could hear a pin drop within the audience, this alongside the red lighting by Matthew Parry really set the scene.

Yvette utilised her stage space well and I was surprised to find out the cast only had one exit side stage. This did not falter the production as scenes moved naturally, as an audience member I knew exactly where each part of the house was. The stage never felt crowded and each character was directed with purpose. Another exceptional job done by Yvette, I look forward to seeing more of her work.

'Six little Soldier Boys playing with a hive; A bumblebee stung one and then there were five'. Emily Brent, played by (Caroline Young) was a force to be reckoned with. A waspish, crotchety spinster and displayed some fantastic facial expressions. A lovely strong no-nonsense performance, each line perfectly executed. She reminded me of the great Maggie Smith, never dropping out of character.

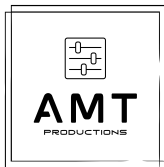
With the power down and only candles to light the stage the audience could feel the fear from the final five characters. The eerie ambience sent a chill down the audience's spine. When the gun fired, the loud bang made the audience jump, cutting the tension with a knife. *'Five little Soldier Boys going in for law; One got in Chancery and then there were four'*. Justice Wargarve, played by (Stuart McNeil) had an air and presence much like the BBC actor Charles Dance portraying the judge perfectly. The change from law abiding to evil was flawlessly done.



The sound effects and music from the production was well chosen and never overpowered the performers. Only adding to the ghostly, sinister atmosphere. The sound effects of the wind and sea really made you feel as if you were also on the island. The bad weather outside also helped the cast here by making it more immersive and dramatic. The outside door was always perfectly timed to add a creak or slam making the audience jump or add a ghostly feel, as if the murderer was close by.

'Four little Soldier Boys going out to sea; A red herring swallowed one and then there were three'. Dr Edward Armstrong, played by (Andy Wilson) was the perfect suspect of his fellow housemates because of his medical knowledge. This was a strong, yet understated performance by Andy. He had a good stage presence, and was able to use his voice well to portray Dr Armstrong. The character progression from beginning to end was brilliant, it was a pleasure to watch his character grow.





'Three little Soldier Boys walking in the zoo; A big bear hugged one and then there were two'. A character who made himself known from the moment he stood on stage was William Blore, played by (Alexander Davies). He made the audience laugh and added some much needed lightheartedness to a dark murder mystery. "Someone shut up grandpa", was a line that was delivered with perfect comical timing. Davis was the name he used as he bounced on to the stage, falsely portraying a

South African business man. The repetition of the introductions to the other characters was entertaining, playing up to the comedy of the character, which the audience appreciated. He is eventually discovered to be the ex-detective Blore, who runs a private detective agency. This was an excellent performance by a very watchable performer.



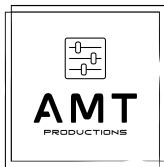
'Two little Soldier Boys sitting in the sun; One got frizzled up and then there was one'. The charismatic and charming Captain Lombard was played by (Nuri Ucuncu). He portrayed varying levels of emotion and delivered his dry sense of humour very well. With a secure performance Nuri worked well with the rest of the cast, forming good relationships with them. Having a natural stage presence, Nuri commanded the stage and brought moments of light relief with his flippant remarks! Delivering his lines on point with superb timing.

'One little Soldier Boy left all alone; He went out and hanged himself and then there were none!' The last one standing, Vera Claythorne played by (Pamela Hewitt), was a very accomplished performance. This is one of the most demanding roles of the evening portraying concern, fear and finally acceptance. Pamela had a good stage presence and held her own on the stage. An outstanding performance given. From the moment she stepped onstage she didn't come out of character. Your eyes were drawn to Pamela whenever she was on stage and was very believable in the role. She portrayed varied emotions, her natural ability to cry at the end of the play was touching. Her blood curdling screams sent shock waves through the audience, Pamela would have held her own on a professional stage.



I loved the natural cohesion between Vera and Lombard, her playing hard to get and he continually trying to persuade her of his feelings. Both Nuri and Pamela were excellent and their empathy brought a touch of levity and romantic lightness to this mystery.





The costumes were a perfect fit for the era and brought each character to life alongside the static set that worked really well to create a picture worthy stage setting. Sticking with the black, white and grey colour pallet really worked well and added a personal touch to the production. By using these plain colours it allowed the red colour to stand out so much more. With the blood as each character died; the red lights on the pictures to represent justice being served for their crime, the red velvet cape around the dead judge and the red light while blood was being cleaned. The lighting by Matthew for the performance was minimal but very effective, adding tension and emotion to the scenes. The lighting transitions were well timed and worked perfectly alongside the performance.

Fred Narracott played by (Pete Russell) also needs to get a mention as it goes to show there are no small parts because he made his character known. With all ten soldiers dying in the end it only gives the question who was the murderer and was justice finally served?

Yvette has been a member of Ashton Hayes Theatre Club since she was eight and has enjoyed returning to her home theatre group with a new challenge. Her strong choice of casting, and leadership created a brilliant piece of theatre. I am glad Yvette decided to choose Agatha Christie's original ending from the book. Overall, this was a really excellent production with a very talented cast and equally talented production team.

From the moment I stepped into Tarvin Community Centre I felt welcomed and was greeted with warm smiles. Thank you to Ashton Hayes Theatre Club for their kind invitation and hospitality. It only goes to show when looking at the bottom of the program, seeing the list of all the other shows and the talented groups on your doorsteps how community minded this theatre group really is. All the best for your future productions.

Reviewer: Abigail Bradbury - AMT Productions

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If you want to see Ashton Hayes Theatre Club's next production 'It's a Wonderful Life' December 2024. Please follow the link below to book your tickets.

<https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/ashtonhayestheatreclub/its-a-wonderful-life/e-qyodgd>

