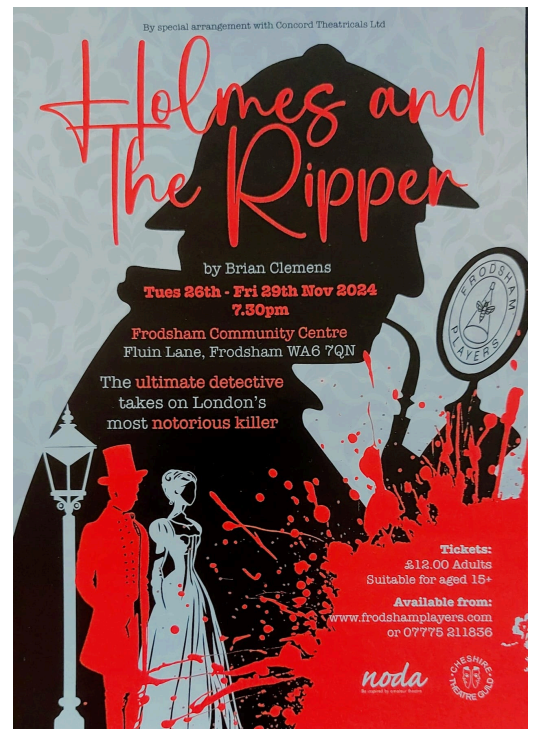


AMATEUR THEATRE REVIEW: Homes and the Ripper – Frodsham Players, Cheshire West and Chester.

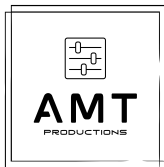
There's nothing better on a winter's evening than going to the theatre to watch a Sherlock Holmes mystery. I had the pleasure of watching Frodsham Player's production, Brian Ciemens - 'Holmes and the Ripper' at Frodsham Community Centre, in Cheshire West and Chester. Directed by Iain Bennett, this production had the audience jumping with fright, laughing and waiting in anticipation for the Ripper to finally get caught.



Between August and November 1888, the Whitechapel area of London was the scene of five brutal murders. The killer was dubbed 'Jack the Ripper'. All the women murdered were prostitutes, and all except for one were horribly mutilated. The case is one of the most famous unsolved mysteries of English crime. There has been much speculation as to the identity of the killer. It has been suggested that he or she was a butcher or a doctor, based on the precision of the mutilations and knowledge of anatomy.

This production written by Brian Ciemens is based on the book 'Jack the Ripper, the Final Solution' by Stephen Knight. It is a fast-moving dramatisation of one of the most plausible of Ripper theories. This dramatisation required a strong cast and Frodsham Player's did not disappoint. This project has been a few years in the making and the attention to detail needs to be acknowledged with the small figures of composes on the bookcase and real leaves on the ground.





Iain's vision and gripping set design allowed the audience to fully enter the world of Sherlock Holmes. This was no longer the Frodsham community hall we all know and love but the dark streets of London. Iain had staged this production skilfully by adding a variety of layers. Using the floor space as an area of the London streets, the steps to symbolise the bridge and the main stage for Sherlock's home. There was real attention to detail with the use of realistic props and a mixture of period furniture matching the era, setting the scene well. The set was innovative and of a high standard, the stage area was used to maximum efficiency and the atmosphere and pace of the play was enhanced by some excellent technical atmospheric lighting.

The lighting for the performance was minimal but very effective, adding a homely feel, tension and emotion to the scene using flickering lights and a lit fireplace. Iain used a time honoured Victorian lamp post, controlled via the lighting desk effectively. By having the newspaper boy played by Issac Bright read his articles "Extra! Extra! Read all about it!" under the glow of the street light. This allowed the audience to be transported back in time from the moment they stepped into the room. This was an artistic idea to help with scene transitions, utilising the stage well. Black cloths placed around the audience and in front of the stage gave it a more of a polished look.

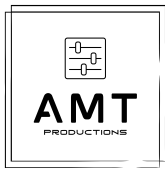


It was nice to see young people involved within the production learning from experienced strong actors like David Leslie, playing Sir William Gull. In an outstanding performance, he commanded your attention when he was on the stage.

Well done to the cast for adapting to the last minute casting changes, very professionally done. As an audience member I didn't even notice. A mention here has to be made to Andy Wilson who played the Stranger and the Policeman. He is a perfect example of 'there are no small roles', as Andy stood out from the crowd and

was one of the most memorable characters within the show. Multi rolling can be a very difficult task but Andy embodied each character with expertise.

The sound effects for the production were well chosen and never overpowered the performers. Only adding to the sinister atmosphere. I almost wish there were more ambience sounds of London played in the background. The costumes were a perfect fit for the era and brought each character to life alongside the set that worked really well to create a picture worthy stage setting. It was nice to see some traditional costumes being used like the Policeman's jacket.



The game, as they say, is afoot! Reimagining Dr Watson, by giving the character a woman's touch was a wonderful concept and an absolute success. Making her a woman opened up a new door in the legacy of Sherlock Holmes that very few had even thought to touch before. Historically, women were often excluded from the narrative of their time, their contributions minimised or erased. Iain's excellent casting reclaims a space for women in the world of Sherlock Holmes, allowing for a fresh perspective on the iconic duo.

The character Dr Watson is very smart, social, empathetic, willing to sacrifice for others and specifically for her partnership with Sherlock Holmes. Carol Shinkfield did not shy away from this challenge but gave a very strong, consistent performance, nicely contained and controlled with subtle changes in body language and vocal control. She gave the character a strong stage presence, delivering her lines with energy, attack and clear articulation, so every word was heard.

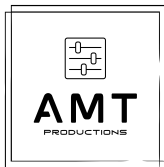


This production was seeking to breathe new life into a classic tale and they succeeded. Just as women in the late Victorian era were breaking barriers and challenging societal norms, Frodsham Players invited audiences to reconsider their assumptions, embrace the unexpected, and rediscover the enduring power of Sherlock Holmes through a modern lens.

Sir Robert Anderson performed by Martin Stockdale reactions within the scenes were very strong, he brought his character to life for the audience by performing with his whole body not just reading the words on a page.

The program designed by Martin Maris was beautifully made and excellently put together. I really enjoyed the historical aspects and use of imagery. It is rare to find a program that captivates the eyes of the audience at this standard, a colourful retelling of history that informs the narrative.





The private detective Sherlock Holmes was played by David Varley. David makes for a wonderful Sherlock Holmes, giving him depth and personality. Maintaining a strong stage presence he connected with each character well, allowing all of the scenes to flow together nicely. He had a lot of dialogue to learn and as an audience member, you could see the dedication and commitment he gave to his performance. When entering the Asylum, David gave us raw emotions when thinking of his lost love. This scene was directed well by Iain and the ensemble cast members created a chilling and eerier atmosphere for the audience.

It was wonderful to experience and feel a huge sense of community and commitment by Frodsham Players. From the moment we entered we felt a warm welcome and were greeted by friendly faces. There was even an immersive experience with the raffle prize being themed for the show and the ice creams having unique names that the cast had chosen. 'Death by chocolate' was a crowd pleaser. This group truly had a sense of community and dedication to the arts by advertising other local theatre groups, sharing props and costumes and facilitating an opportunity for the next inspiring generation.



I must congratulate director Iain Bennett, the cast and everyone involved in this excellent piece of theatre. As the lights dimmed and the London fog rolled in using haze effects, the audience left behind a modern world and was transported to a time of mystery and intrigue. Thank you to Frodsham Players for their kind invitation and hospitality. We really enjoyed our evening's entertainment and look forward to seeing what Frodsham players have next to offer.

Reviewer: Abigail Bradbury - AMT Productions

Date: 28.11.24

If you want to see Frodsham Players next production 'A Man For All Seasons' April 2025. Please follow the link below to book your tickets.

https://frodshamplayers.com/?fbclid=IwY2xjawHBhf1leHRuA2FlbQlxMAABHbczowtK6UFFbX3iJT4ds9Sy62CgsdCD5qT0FR5jl2wqlZhtGVvXv3R1vQ_aem_mts8QbdYJeSaEdMJMdNMLw

