

Society : Wargrave Theatre  
Production : A Bunch of Amateurs  
Written By : Ian Hislop & Nick Newman  
Date : 05/04/25  
Venue : Woodclyffe Hall, Wargrave  
District : 13  
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

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Show Report

Thank you for the invitation to review your production of A Bunch of Amateurs, which I thoroughly enjoyed. As always on my visits to Wargrave, I was made to feel very welcome by Chez, Len and Ann.

The play is a wonderful window into amateur theatre and centres around Hollywood A-lister Jefferson Steel who has arrived in the UK to perform King Lear (he thinks) in Stratford Upon Avon. However, on arrival he discovers that this Stratford is in fact a sleepy Suffolk village and, rather than appearing with the Royal Shakespeare Company he will be sharing the stage with a bunch of amateurs who have invited him in a desperate bid to save their theatre from closing.

### **Cast**

#### **Celia Reinbolt (Dorothy Nettle)**

Celia brought an air of true British grit to the role of Dorothy, the director of the amateur production of King Lear and dealt with all the “goings on” admirably. She got increasingly desperate as she tried to keep her cast together whilst also managing the rather petulant Hollywood A-Lister Jefferson. She had a great degree of calm (and some gritting of her teeth) as she educated him in the ways of ‘amateur dramatics’ whilst coping with their increasing attraction to each other. She also very smoothly switched from director of the play to her character as Shakespeare’s fool delivering lines from the play in the scene changes with good pace and timing.

#### **Mike Watt (Nigel Dewbury)**

Mike was suitably pompous in his portrayal of Nigel a Solicitor and the previous leading light in the Stratford Players. He played the role for all it was worth with excellent diction and timing and just the right amount of melodrama when delivering his Shakespearian lines. Mike had great stage presence and characterisation, which he kept throughout, and left the audience in no doubt that he (Nigel)

should be playing King Lear not Jefferson. His jealousy towards the upstart American, and his attempts to oust the unwanted actor from their production was excellently played and very funny.

**Grace Tye** (Mary Plunkett)

Grace was fabulous in the role of the owner of the village B&B who hosted Jefferson for his stay in Stratford. She came over as slightly crazy in her flirty infatuation with Jefferson and perfectly portrayed her unashamed and total adoration for him. She was very amusing as she attributed famous film roles to him erroneously and totally overestimated his affection for her. She contrasted her crush on Jefferson convincingly with her jealous anger towards him over his apparent misbehaviour with Lauren and romancing of Dorothy. Very much a woman scorned!!

**Jaspar Holmes** (Dennis Dobbins)

Jaspar gave an assured and hilarious performance as likeable Dennis the handyman, who took a shine to Jefferson and developed a very convincing 'bromance' with him. He looked very relaxed in the role with excellent comic timing and physicality. His attempts at staging the eyeball effect were very amusing, especially the one when he ate the pickled onion eye! He delivered his lines with a rather nerdy tone which suited his characterisation, and he played the role with innocent sincerity and an obvious deep love for the theatre group.

**Graham Wheal** (Jefferson Steel)

Graham confidently played the 'stereotypical' American actor with a monstrous ego and all the required swagger and self-importance to be convincing in his portrayal. He was perfectly arrogant and disgruntled as he insisted on receiving all the perks he once enjoyed as a star which he contrasted nicely as he showed humility and care for his daughter as the play progressed. Graham had wonderful stage presence with lovely mannerisms and facial expressions and a natural West Coast American accent which never faltered once throughout the play.

**Victoria Dunne** (Lauren Bell)

Victoria did a good job as the overly enthusiastic marketing executive and wife of the sponsor whose former career as a physiotherapist almost got the play cancelled. The massage scene with Jefferson was hilarious and very well played, although as a physiotherapist by profession, I can say that I have never adopted that approach to treatment, but for Jefferson, it clearly worked!!

**Conor Black (David)**

Conor appeared briefly on stage as David the quiet farmer who often had to miss rehearsals and then take part on Skype. Together with his brother **Aidan**, he sang with a lovely tenor voice to entertain us with some of the musical interludes. Both sang with lovely tone and tuning.

**Rhianna Inman** Jessica Steele

Rhianna gave a strong performance as Jefferson's disappointed and disapproving daughter, capturing all the attitude and angst of a neglected teenager. She was appropriately loud and spoke throughout with an authentic American accent. Arriving in the village with the intention of making him pay, she gradually melted so that she could find some love in her heart for him. Rhianna had lovely characterisation, and good rapport with the other actors, particularly her father.

**Aidan Black, Cath Evans and Alex Limia** (Journalists and other Parts)

These three worked hard in their different roles and acting as stagehands. They were perfect as the Journalists hot on the heels of a good story and anything 'Jefferson Steele' related. They were also in good voice as they sang in musical interludes. Each of their auditions were very nicely played; one speaking terrifically fast, one speaking so quietly you couldn't hear a word and one a man with a gruff voice and beard auditioning for a young lady! All got well deserved laughs from the audience.

**Creatives**

**Ann Roberts** (Director and Cameo Auditionee)

This a great play with a wonderfully tongue in cheek plot (as you would expect from Ian Hislop and Nick Newman) which strikes a chord with many amateur groups. Ann did a great job with the direction to bring a funny, entertaining, and engaging production to the stage. The play was well cast, and she had worked with the actors to develop their characters so that they were natural and never contrived or farcical. Together they developed the comedic aspects of the play and succeeded in bringing the characters to life, drawing plenty of laughs from the audience. Her small cameo as 88-year-old auditionee Enid was very funny.

**Dave Robinson, Henry Marchant and Mark Cox** (Stage Managers and Set Build)

The stage managers oversaw the scene changes efficiently which were smoothly undertaken by the 'cast crew'. I was impressed to see that the umbrella and coat had been made wet by backstage so that the actors looked like they had been out in the rain.

The set looked sturdily built to look like a farm barn with opening doors and various painted brickwork flats and set pieces.

**Sheila Williams and Sheila Brocklebank** (Set Design and Painting)

The set was simple but very effectively designed to look like a barn. The box set was painted with brown beams and interspersed with small flats painted with different types of brick and stonework.

To the front stage right area there was a large wicker basket full of costumes and a box of props.

Front stage left was Mary's B&B set with a table and chairs. I liked the fact that the set was simple as it reinforced the fact that this was a play on a budget and like many amateur societies, they needed to save money.

**David Williams** (Lighting)

After an initial problem with gremlins in the lights and the odd moment when the wrong area lit for a second, the stage was well lit for the rest of the play. All areas of the stage were covered with no areas in shadow. The lightening effect whilst subtle worked well with the sound effect during the thunderstorm and the blue lighting added to the atmosphere of Jefferson's desperation.

**Peter Knowles** (Sound)

The production was supported by some well-timed sound effects including birdsong to reinforce the Suffolk countryside location. There was some authentic thunder and rain and some well-cued telephones, a gunshot and slammed doors. David's recorded voice on skype was a nice touch, although it was a little quiet.

**Ann Roberts and Cast** (Costumes)

The play was set in current time, so most of the costumes were the actors own. Jefferson's costume of a tee-shirt, shades and a twisted scarf contrasted nicely with Nigel's smart shirt and bow tie and very visibly showed the difference between the 'American film star' and the 'British Theatrical'.

Rhianna had a very impressive sheepskin coat and shades. Mary's tight dress and trousers nicely emphasised her flirty persona and her flamenco dress was brilliant, fitting perfectly with her feistiness when she caught Jefferson romancing Dorothy. The costumes for the society's production of King Lear were fitting for the Shakespeare times and added colour and authenticity to the play.

**Joy Haynes, Emmajane Hughes and Cast (Properties)**

There were a fair number of props and set dressings which worked well for the production. The wicker costume basket was particularly effective, as was the mobility scooter which Dennis manoeuvred very impressively onto the stage. Together with the scooter, the products collected to meet Jefferson's demands were very comical. I was glad to see that there were what looked like chips in the fast-food containers for Dorothy's dinner with Jefferson and Jessica but having a bit whisky in the bottle for Jefferson to finish would have looked more authentic. There was a lot of attention to detail with the props very clearly seen with the Sun newspapers with their topical front-page headlines which were perfect.

This play has a wonderful script which is quite hilarious at times and particularly resonates with those of us who are actively in amateur dramatics. Congratulations to all the cast and creative team for another successful show.

*Cate*

NODA London District 13 Representative