



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne (APS)
Name of Production: A Wife for All Reasons
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre
Date: Thursday 18th January 2024
Adjudicator: Tash Moore

Written in 2019 by a local creative, Stephanie Easton, *'A Wife for All Reasons'* assembles a collection of well-known poems and original monologues with the aim of sharing the stories of the six wives of Henry VIII from their own unique perspectives. The piece establishes a format that is followed consistently throughout; the Narrator introduces a queen, a poem is recited and then the queen in question delivers their monologue which includes quotations from the poem, typically towards the end of their monologue. The thematic content of the poems were better suited to some monologues than others. Nonetheless, it was an interesting concept and therefore enjoyable to experience. Stylistically the writing struggled at times as the emotional, introspective nature of a monologue was lost to what felt more like a history lesson, but each of the actors made the most of bringing the dramatic content to the forefront of their individual performances and engaging the audience with feeling over fact.

The variety presented in APS's programming is truly to be commended. It is refreshing to watch a unique piece of theatre that offers a platform for a group of talented actors to showcase their abilities and I'm sure enjoyable for the creative and design teams to work within a distinctive historical period.

SET AND STAGING

The group are clearly confident working creatively in their resident venue. The space offers upstage entrances on the elevated staging area as well as through side and rear doors into the auditorium. The intimacy of this venue greatly aided a piece of this nature, bringing the audience close to characters as they shared deeply personal stories and insights.

A pleasing chequered pattern featured on two-thirds of the floor on which stood a raised platform stage right, hosting a red and gold throne which was used frequently throughout, surrounded by wood panelled walls that boasted pleasing insignia detail. A simple white bench was positioned stage left in front of black velvet draped on the walls. At times these settings were effectively adapted using the addition of a cloth – white on the throne to create Jane Seymour's deathbed and

black on the bench to denote Kathryn Howard's block. The two upstage entrances were adorned with red drapery which were beautifully lit creating a rich sense of texture (although a few unintentional creases were also exposed!)

Blocking throughout a piece such as this calls for well considered, minimalistic choices. Movement should always have intent, therefore when so little is required this can feel like a brave choice. I got the impression that the actors were blocked minimally, although some cast members had a tendency to meander. It takes absolute confidence in both your characterisation as well as the script to embrace stillness, especially in a piece such as this.

Of course, interactions between the players were limited other than (as scripted) when the Lady in Waiting assisted with a couple of exits. It was lovely to see the first poet engage with Catherine of Aragon both in the eye contact they held and in how he led her by the hand on stage. It was a shame that this exploration of interactivity did not continue throughout the piece, but the closing poem brought the queens together with simple and effective blocking used here.

All company members exuded confidence in both their characterisations and the meaning behind the poetry; a testament to the director's vision and guidance.

PROPS

Minimal props were featured in this particular production. The Narrator's period book served its purpose, as did Anne Boleyn's small red '*book of hours*'. The tissue used by Anne of Cleves looked a little modern from where I was sitting, but perhaps I was mistaken in thinking that this was a tissue and not a handkerchief; a minor point.

COSTUMES

The Narrator and those reciting the poems wore blacks with dashes of red which were tastefully added with such pieces as a belt, bowtie, braces, and a cummerbund. With the poetry originating from a wide range of ages and styles, the decision to keep these costumes simple yet effective was apt.

The queens boasted a variety of attractive gowns that were true to the period with matching headwear and well-chosen jewellery to compliment. It was clear that much thought and consideration was put into selecting colour palettes to suit each character. The black velvet and gold exemplified Catherine of Aragon's proud status, whereas Anne Boleyn's red and luxurious gold skirt represented her passionate and flirtatious nature. Simple white gowns and mop caps were worn by Jane Seymour and Kathryn Howard, and the Lady in Waiting wore a striking blue gown with impressive wide sleeves. The red beading on Anne of Cleve's costume was a lovely detail, as were the three broaches worn by Catherine of Aragon from which hung two strings of pearls. With such attention paid to detail in the costume department, it was notable and a real shame that some of the queens wore modern shoes that at times broke the otherwise carefully crafted period picture.

SOUND

Vocals were well-supported and projected by the company. In such a small space the acoustics were kind and therefore there weren't any issues in hearing any line of dialogue throughout. Renaissance musical interludes were used effectually to separate each of the scenes, giving the audience a moment to reflect on each story before moving on to the next. The timing of such interludes were finely judged so as to not immediately break one's reverie, but to ease the audience from one emotional state into the next.

LIGHTING

This was practically designed and operated with command. I particularly enjoyed the neat remote operation of the clusters of stage right and left candles, this was most pleasing to watch! All areas of the stage were well-lit, bar one brief moment when Catherine Parr stood upstage of the throne.

White states were used throughout, with the exception of a blue light used to exemplify the stark situation poor Kathryn Howard found herself in. Reserving one colour change for such a moment had great impact. Her exit from this scene felt a little exposed, so a blackout may have worked here.

The lift on the upstage drapery enhanced the texture, thereby adding to the overall sense of luxury and regality.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

With no moving pieces, except for the cloth brought on for Jane and the black cloth set and struck by Kathryn Howard, no Stage Management team is credited in the programme. Instead here, I shall heartily commend the team that '*realised*' the set build, led by Designer and Director Adrian Harding. Any production is reliant on such labours of love, and for such a small team to masterfully craft this set is most impressive.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Narrator

Although reading from the script placed within a large prop manuscript, this did not greatly detract from audience engagement. This choice was understandable as some of the sections, particularly the opening whistle-stop historical overview of Henry VIII's wives, were of considerable length. The actor held the attention of the audience and drove the energy of the piece with a rich and resonant voice, using effective intonation to lift the lighter moments – which were always a welcome relief in the heavier, more lengthy passages. The show felt in safe and comfortable hands as we were guided through various stories and historical details. It was lovely to also see this actor perform one of the poems in the second act.

'I Am'

This poem was read with a moving sincerity, delivered to Catherine of Aragon as she entered the space and later took to the stage, foretelling her loneliness and desire to seek solace from God. The delivery of the poem was enhanced by the rapt attention and connection communicated by Catherine as she watched from the side auditorium door. The command of phrasing, clearly-communicated intent and grounded emotional connection were all delivered beautifully. This was an excellent performance.

Catherine of Aragon

Catherine stands before her King to address the annulment of their marriage. She is feeling betrayed and her pride is deeply hurt by such a notion. Yet she has convictions in her religious beliefs that a divorce will not be possible, despite the fact that it is clear that Henry is ready to move on with his next wife to be. This monologue was delivered with poise and regal status, with well-judged pace and shaping of emotional dynamics. Stand out moments included the fondness with which she remembered Arthur and the closeness in grief Catherine and Henry shared when they lost stillborn children. The audience felt that there was a truth in this relationship which stood the test of time, unlike the five marriages that were to follow. With an emphasis on "*you and your people*" the actor brought the audience into her world, allowing us to feel a sense of her pain and loss whilst also making a comment on her feelings for Henry.

'To the Virgins to Make Much of Time'

The delivery of the first half of this poem carried a sombre and cautionary tone. This contrasted nicely with the lift on "*Then be not coy*" which allowed the piece to flourish into a more optimistic tone, a change in mood which was replicated in the monologue that followed – urging Anne to seize the day before her beauty fades.

Anne Boleyn

This was a thoughtfully constructed scene. Both the entrance and exit were accompanied by Anne singing a haunting rendition of '*Gather Ye Rosebuds*'. Although the setting for this monologue is following the birth of Elizabeth, the audience sadly know what lies in store for Anne and therefore the lyrics here were most telling. The pavane was used twice but each for a different reason; the first to demonstrate how Henry wooed Anne, and the latter to illustrate how Anne planned to win Henry's affections once more. This highly articulate actor delivered this monologue with great knowing. Anne sees and understands all; Henry is bored of her and already has his sights set on his next wife, however (unlike Catherine of Aragon) Anne is willing to fight for Henry's love and declares that she has the resilience to give him his much-awaited heir. The performance really came alive here, as Anne celebrated her assets and concluded with a triumphant resolve.

'Remember'

Although written for a lover, it became clear when Jane Seymour entered halfway through this poem with a babe in arms that the context for this mournful message was set from the perspective of a mother bidding farewell to her child. The ideas and themes were clearly expressed in readiness for the scene that was to follow - Jane wants her son to live on and remember her fondly, without sorrow.

Jane Seymour

Barefoot and delirious on her deathbed, this was a challenging role to take on. A monologue has a notable focus when addressing people (real or otherwise) so this gave the actor much to play with. Jane spoke lovingly to her baby and when she 'saw' her father we believed her pain. Giving Anne a different voice worked well and we clearly understood the weight of the guilt Jane felt over Anne's untimely end, the burden of this haunting her to the very end.

'If'

It was lovely to see the Narrator outside of their more practical duties to recite this piece, written by Rudyard Kipling for his son around the challenges one may face in life, and how to overcome them. This is a complex poem as it accumulates a variety of ideas until its conclusive finale. This challenge was met by the actor who relished in each and every thought and image.

Anne of Cleves

Although on her deathbed, this Anne had a great sense of humour that the actor made the most of in this scene. The character did not hold back on her views of Henry and in particular, the audience enjoyed her recollection of how her marriage to Henry was *not* consummated. Anne's repulsion for the now-aging king was clear, a view to be later continued by the next queen. It was interesting to hear about the relationships Anne of Cleves built with the Princesses Mary and Elizabeth, how she won the trust of the king as more of a sister figure, that she inherited properties from the Boleyn family and that although her marriage to Henry was loveless, she fell in love with her new home country, England. Although a simple woman of simple pleasures, Anne of Cleves was a strong and independent woman who inspired many, including two future female monarchs.

'How Do I Love Thee'

This sonnet, compiled from a series of love letters is a declaration of passionate love, made with the freedom of choice. This aptly sets the scene for Kathryn Howard and her contrasting feelings for King Henry and Thomas Culpeper. This poem was delivered with a calm sincerity.

Kathryn Howard

With a youthful passion for life and a wilful desire not to lose it, this monologue was delivered with energy and heart. The focus with which the actor covered the bench with a black cloth, creating the block to practise a *'good death'* was slow and deliberate, which held the rapt attention of the audience. This flirtatious and carefree character, as represented in her long loose flowing hair, was well brought to life with ease. We felt for her desperation to hold onto her precious life and believed that she would enjoy it for all it's worth.

'Green Groweth the Holly'

The light relief imparted here following another hard-hitting scene was welcomed. This poem about a faithful male lover was written by Henry VIII and introduces us to his sixth, and final wife.

Catherine Parr

This final monologue was delivered with command and natural stage presence. We believed that this was an intelligent character who truly embodied her regal status. Expressive hand gestures were used which aided the storytelling, and the heavier fact-sharing moments were brought to life as the delivery focussed on what Catherine's opinions were on certain proceedings. The actor built rapport with the audience, engaging with them in sharing the character's sense of humour, particularly with regard to Henry's *'limitations'*. The strength of the character was summarised in the powerful delivery of the line, *'I ruled in Henry's stead'*.

'When We Two Parted'

There was certainly no love lost here for King Henry VIII in the play's finale as the six queens and Lady in Waiting delivered this final poem about a bitter and painful end to a relationship. It was interesting to hear a brief personal insight from the Lady in Waiting – I expect she would have many a tale to tell! The final picture of these seven women gave us food for thought as the audience had much to reflect on as the evening's entertainment drew to a close.

Many thanks to the society for their warm hospitality on a chilly night and congratulations to everyone involved in staging *'A Wife for All Reasons'*. It was a pleasure to watch this production and look forward to seeing more in the future.

Tash Moore

26th January 2023