

TRELAWNEY OF THE 'WELLS'

2004

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A battle on the society front

Teddington Theatre Club

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TEDDINGTON Theatre Club's current production is set in London in the 1860's.

We meet the "Wells" stock theatre company, saying farewell to Rose Trelawny, who is engaged to Arthur Gower, the grandson of a judge. Entering into a different social stratum, and an entirely different way of life, proves difficult for Rose to the detriment of both her engagement and to her professional skills.

Trelawny of the Wells, Arthur Pinero's sentimental comedy, is both a love story and a social commentary of that period. Interestingly, the play also gives an insight into the development of nineteenth century theatre, which is echoed in Pinero's plot. A play about the theatre clearly draws thespians, for the audience at Sunday evening's performance obviously enjoyed his gentle send-up of 'theatrical types', still highly recognisable today.

Typical examples were skilfully portrayed by Mandy Stenhouse as Imogen Parrott, the ambitious actress, biting voraciously into many backs with her witty but acerbic put-downs, and Heather Godley as the bombastic Mrs. Telfer who was later to dissolve into gracious humility and bow to theatrical progress. Angela Francis's pert and vivacious Avonia Bunn added cockney pepper to this heady mix of theatre players.

The romantic plot revolves, of course, around the lovers, Rose and Arthur, played with bubbling chemistry by Amanda-Jade Tyler and Paul Grimwood. Rose was an enchanting combination of femininity and feisty fire, tested to the limit by the rigid regulation of Sir William's household. Arthur's discomfiture with both his fiancée's theatrical folk and his grandfather's society circle was very convincingly depicted. The strength of true love wins through in the end, though, and Arthur finds his true vocation.

High society was represented by Sir William Gower, a testy and pompous judge, and Miss

Trafalgar, his prudish spinster sister. Sir William's change from buttoned-up bastion of fixed ideas to benevolent benefactor was played with great strength by Michael Norman, as a man full of crabby sneers and tortured vowels. Cynthia Carss acted the part of Trafalgar (the accent being definitely on the first syllable) with great relish as a somewhat scatter-brained and priggish maiden aunt for whom nothing must be "out of place". She has tremendous skill as a comic actress, but came over as perhaps too actress-y in style for Cavendish Square.

The large cast took a little while to build up the full energy and pace demanded by the play, but once at full power made a forceful ensemble. Special mentions must be made of Charles Halford who gave a typically strong performance as Tom Wrench, lovelorn erstwhile suitor to Rose and later an entrepreneur of the new style of theatre; of Max Wiltshire, as Captain de Foenix, desperately trying to keep out of "trouble"; and of Marion McClaren for her well drafted portrait of the Clerkenwell landlady, Mrs Mossop.

The brilliant costumes and set dressing were very evocative of the period, but a wider depiction of the social differences might have made the tensions between the two groups more pronounced.

'Trelawny of the Wells' was written in 1898 for the large and lavishly equipped theatres of the times. Director, Barry Hill had the difficult task of translating this big (in several senses of the word) play to the modern stage at the Hampton Hill Playhouse. He chose to produce the play in the round and it generally worked well in what can be a difficult style to accomplish successfully. Indeed the large round table in the opening scene largely dictated the configuration. Alan Corbett's design included an ingenious transform, which gave interest to an otherwise long set change. Subtle lighting, designed by David Buffham helped to overcome the limitations of the in-the-round set.

Pinero is recognised as a master of the well-made play and Barry Hill and his company have successfully brought us a well-made production with nothing "out of place".