



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society  
Production : The Charlatan  
Date : 16/6/12  
Venue : Lopping Hall  
Report by : Jackie Mitchell

## Report

Based loosely on the real case of Franz Anton Mesmer and Maria Theresia Paradies, *The Charlatan* was a fascinating play examining the role of the psyche and emotional state on one young girl's physical well-being, and one doctor's rather unusual way of treating it. Although the plot was based on reality, the details of the case are not clear, and it was apparent that the characters and events throughout the play were given a certain amount of dramatic licence, which resulted in a compelling evening's entertainment. LADS as usual rose to the challenge of this play with aplomb, delivering a generally slick and confident performance, with no weak links among the performers.

The set was deceptively simple, but highly effective. The three different levels together with the simple colours on the walls helped to create the three different rooms where the action took place, and allowed the pace of the play to be maintained throughout, with no long pauses for scene changes, the walls of the three different rooms also maintained a certain consistency in style, that helped to draw the set together, despite the different colours, and this combined with the levels resulted in a very successful set. The various items stage furniture was also generally good. The two fake pianos, although not completely convincing as pianos, were nevertheless able to convey the idea of the instrument, while still allowing Maria's head to be seen whenever she was sitting behind them, and also not taking up too much space on the stage, thus allowing the action to continue unimpeded throughout the show. The wooden chairs used in the different rooms also seemed suitably period, and helped to set the scene – these were also used to generally good effect throughout. The chair down stage front in the Paradies room was a little awkwardly placed, rather obscuring Maria when she was sitting at the piano, at least from the right side of the audience, and the chair in Mesmer's office, when moved towards the centre, did seem to slightly restrict the performance space at one point during the first scene there, but aside from this, the functional and decorative furniture was well-placed and helped to create the right atmosphere for the play. The smaller items, such as the brandy glasses, and various coloured items also appeared to have been carefully selected, and together, the set and props were very well suited to the production.

Costuming was also generally very good. The men's outfits and wigs in particular all seemed to be of excellent quality, and well suited to the characters and era of the play. Professor Barth's stockings were perhaps a trifle thin, especially compared to the rest of the men, while the wigs of the two older ladies, Frau Paradies and Frau Mesmer, were a little ragged, and might have benefited from being redressed, however, all the female dresses were also of good quality, and suitably styled for the period, and the large hat worn by Frau Paradies following the big discussion about hats earlier in the show was excellent, particularly with the matching dress. Makeup too was understated, but effective – it seemed that Anton Mesmer himself may have had a small amount of makeup applied to help to subtly age him, around his cheeks and eyes, and if so, this was particularly effective, just giving his features the hint of middle age without seeming unrealistic.

The music that was used throughout the play, and formed a central point to the plot, was apparently performed and recorded by Rebecca Leung, Ben Yelverton, James Bluff and Roger Bluff from Bancroft's School,

and all the pieces were well suited to the play, and very well played by the various performers. The timing of the pieces throughout the play was also very good, with seemingly perfect tie-ups between the action on stage and the playing of the various pieces, which helped to lend slickness and believability to the play.

With a reasonably large cast of eight, it was quite surprising to note that there really was not a single weak link among the players. Anton Mesmer, played by David Stelfox was a suitably enigmatic character in the opening, but a man who was revealed as genuinely caring about the welfare of his patient, despite his somewhat arrogant belief in his own abilities. David's performance was well-rounded and convincing, his dialogue was natural and believable, and this was a very good picture of a three-dimensional character.

As his patient, Maria-Theresa Paradies, Sophie Robertson gave a powerful performance. Her apparent blindness was very convincing, and her characterisation as the somewhat unstable young girl, who struggles to deal with her parents continual arguing was so real it was somewhat upsetting. As a somewhat rosey pianist myself, I would note that her pretend piano playing did not bear any resemblance to the music she was supposedly playing, but this is a very minor criticism in what was otherwise a truly excellent performance. Her accent was consistent and convincing, and her dialogue was clear and very natural sounding.

As her parents, Herr and Frau Paradies, Howard Platt and Cathy Naylor gave a pair of excellent performances. Bringing some great comedy moments to the play, their relationship as the somewhat unhappily married couple was almost uncomfortably accurate, and at times it was hard not to leap up and yell at them, particularly the mother, to point out the damage they were doing to their daughter. Both performances were so natural, and they interacted so perfectly together, that it felt rather like being a fly on the wall during the scenes in their home. As with their daughter, their accents were consistent and well-placed, and their dialogue was clear and easy to understand.

The two rather snobbish medics, Professor Barth and Doctor Stoerck, played by Roger Barker and Foster Barnett, gave two great character performances. Stoerck appeared to suffer a little from a mental block in their opening scene, requiring several prompts which slowed the action down a little, and also perhaps threw the Professor off his lines a bit, however, they both picked up towards the end of their first scene, and did not appear to have any further problems throughout the play. Both characterisations were ideal, giving a great impression of the somewhat snobbish attitudes that were probably prevalent throughout the medical and scientific establishments of the day. These two characters, more than any of the others, were crucial in grounding the play in the attitudes and opinions of the day, both directly, and also by recounting various stories and opinions from other people, outside the rather insular world of the play. These scenes were vital for the understanding of why the other players behaved as they did, and the two performers gave us a clear and real impression of the world they lived in, while ensuring that their scenes still sounded and looked very natural, and not at all contrived.

As Frau Mesmer, the good doctor's wife, Karen Rogers gave a sensitive and natural performance. Her sympathy for the poor blind girl who somewhat unexpectedly came under her care was very realistic, and the flip in her attitude towards her husband, as she saw her life style fall apart was handled very well and hence nicely believable. She managed to strike a perfect balance between a clear affection for her husband, and the need for a secure and comfortable lifestyle in the social environment she was accustomed to. The split with her husband was a sad, but inevitable outcome of events in the play, and her characterisation made this work very well.

As the final, connecting character in the play, Frances Dennis gave a great performance as the gossipy Frau Schwartz. Her dialogue was clear and very real sounding, and her continual gossipy nature, combined with a constant denial of her desire to spread rumours, added some real humour to the play. She managed to switch from spreading her generally completely unfounded rumours, to complaining about her family, and back again, in a very natural manner, and her characterisation was consistent and very plausible. She did seem a little young to have the adult daughter that she referred to throughout the play, as her references certainly suggested that the daughter was not in the first flush of youth, but this was a very minor criticism of what was otherwise an excellent performance.

Directed by Andrew Rogers, this was an excellent production of a very interesting play. The staging was generally intelligent and natural, allowing the characters to perform in a manner which suited them, and very much suited the moment. The use of an accent to differentiate the Paradies station from that of the various doctors was a very clever way to emphasise the difference between them, and similarly with Frau Schwartz. The three classes of people were easily identified both by the way they interacted with each other, and also by how they spoke. There were several nice touches introduced throughout the play, the card game being played by the doctor and professor in their opening scene added realism to their explanatory dialogue, and there were various ideas introduced in the Paradies household that emphasised the relationship between husband and wife, and drew parallels with modern day marriages, allowing the audience to easily understand the basis of their relationship.

This was a thought-provoking and highly entertaining night out, and while as a scientist I take leave to doubt Mesmer's animal magnetism theory, his 'miracle cure' seemed to be more based around the idea that her blindness was psychological, and caused by her inability to cope with her parents continual arguing. The performances in the play were strong enough that it was easy to believe this, and to run with the idea that the peace provided in the Mesmer household, together with his 'treatment', was sufficient to at least partially restore her sight.

I would like to thank LADS for the invitation to review this production, as expected, it was another excellent performance of an interesting play, and I wish you all the best with your next season of plays.

Jackie Mitchell  
Regional Representative  
NODA London District 6