

**LOUGHTON AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY  
'THE SHELL SEEKERS'  
THURSDAY 25<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2010  
LOPPING HALL, LOUGHTON  
BILL EDWARDS**

Based on Rosamunde Pilcher's 1987 novel, this 2005 play by Terence Brady and Charlotte Bingham, shifting in time, tells the story of Penelope Keeling, the daughter of unconventional parents (an artist father and his much-younger French wife), examining her past and her relationships with her adult children. When the play opens, Penelope is in her 60's and has just been discharged from the hospital after what is seemingly a heart attack. Penelope's life from young womanhood to the present is revealed in pieces, from her own point-of-view and those of her children. Much of the forward impetus of the play involves the work of her father - Lawrence Stern, including a painting called "The Shell Seekers", given to Penelope as a wedding present. I have to say right off the bat here that, as a play, it doesn't work particularly well. The fragmented nature of the scenes – especially in Act I – makes the plot difficult to follow, and whilst things do fall into place eventually the audience always seems to be a few steps behind and playing catch up. I can see how it would be a good novel given the scope for wider narrative, but as a play it is way too bitty.

With the exception of the DSR apron of the stage which was painted as the 'stone walled' exterior of the house with an attached pergola made of white 2x4, the action of Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society (LADS) production was played out on a stark stage painted with light crème walls, almost like a 'blank canvas'. Now maybe this is me being a bit too deep and coming up with an interpretation that Trevor Agombar, the set designer never meant, but whilst I can understand the necessity for a set that could instantly be anywhere and anytime, given how the action of the play jumps around, I feel that it was a little too stark and washed out. The idea worked in principal, but needed either a warmer colour or for the mass expanse of crème to be broken up by some subtle patterning. The white curtain that was used to both cover scene changes and help suggest the passage of time both current and backwards, whilst also needing to be a neutral colour also needed to be of a heavier weight because it was too 'floaty' and gossamer – on certain occasion it could be seen through, and because of its lightweight nature, on the evening I attended a couple of the actors got tangled in it as they made entrances and exits. I can however see that it gave an ethereal and dreamlike quality to the transitions into the flashback scenes, if indeed that was what was intended, and whilst I suppose it was unavoidable it could have perhaps been used a bit more sparingly as at times it did become a distraction. The aforementioned pergola did cause sight problems from certain seats – the battens masking some of the actors at times - and would have benefited from having been constructed in two pieces, a top half that could have been attached to the wall of the proscenium arch (if indeed this was possible and would have been allowed) and a bottom half anchored to the floor, so that there was a three foot gap in the middle. This would still have given the desired effect but would have afforded an unobstructed view of the actors from all angles. Various items of furniture were used to depict the time and place for the many scenes – two pink armchairs for Nancy and George's house, an easel and cabinet for Lawrence Stern's studio and so on – and this meant that the scene changes happened quickly and quietly and didn't affect the running of

the show. The properties requirements, under the governance of John and Mary Lowe, were minimal, but what properties there were, were well considered, authentic looking and fitting.

The costumes under the supervision of Christine Eckley were well suited to each character and of the right style and design for the particular period – there were one or two horrors such as Nancy's dowdy puritan style dress in Act I and Noel's 'Neapolitan' outfit of pink shirt, white trousers and chocolate coloured pullover – and all of the correct weight of material to be authentic looking. Richard's soldier uniform was particularly impressive as was Nancy's wax jacket and wellington boots combination for walking the dog – summed the character up to a tee. Terry Tew's lighting which was the other most notable technical contribution was for the most part functional. I appreciate it must be a difficult task to light such a confined space with what must be a limited rig effectively, but at times the action need more subtle lighting – as each scene seemed to be 'full up' – to help convey mood and a subtle change of tone and colour – straw or gold perhaps – for the flashbacks would have assisted in establishing which scenes were in the present and which scenes were memories being acted out. There were one or two glitches on the evening, the most notable being early on when Penelope had to start one of her speeches almost in black out – which I don't think was intended – if it was then my apologies but the transition wasn't smooth or subtle enough to make it look that way. I did however, like the idea of the three children using torches to light their faces in a black out for Penelope's nightmare, although Nancy needed to hold her closer to her face

Andrew Rogers' direction was deft and bore the mark of a confident and well disciplined director. I felt that the piece needed to zip along a bit more, the pace at times was rather pedestrian, but if this was the first night then hopefully that would have picked up in later performances. He resisted the temptation – given the minimalistic set and the fact that this is a character driven piece - to 'over produce' the action for fear that proceedings may have appeared too static and boring. There were no extraneous or apparently unmotivated movements, no shifting characters around for the sake of it, and he instead entrusted his actors to produce the necessary weight of performance to draw the audience in and tell the story. The pivotal role of Penelope was played by Eileen Stock, and this was a monumental part. Her characterisation for the most part was strong and well judged, but there were however, moments of uncertainty – when she has chest pains just before first meeting Danus, seemed to go on little too long before she turned to talk to him, as though she were gathering herself and on the night she took several prompts. Her body language however was very convincing and her facial expressions certainly conveyed her mental and emotional motivations for what she said and did, this was especially true in the moments when she goes into a reverie to remember the past which I thought she played very well.

Jean Cooper as Penelope's eldest daughter Nancy was very well cast. Her delivery was crisp and her body language and facial expressions punctilious and she really convinced as a self centred, greedy, judgemental and not very likeable woman who believes it's her place to order everyone around and continually uses her children as an excuse for all her own failings and lack of genuine concern for her mother, and would drive her husband to distraction had he been that kind of a man. She developed a nicely acerbic antagonism with her brother and sister, the former being born out of contempt and the latter out of jealousy, but her denouement when she breaks down the reading of the will and we see she has become who she is because she just wanted to be loved by her mother and felt she wasn't and regrets not having told her mother she loved her was both touching and convincing and one couldn't help but feel sorry for her, a truly moving moment. Her more attractive, charismatic, subtle and yet no less self centred sister, Olivia, was played with real charm by Christi Drew. Suppressing an Australian/New Zealand/South African twang – apologies for not having a good enough ear to distinguish exactly which, as it was only noticeable on one or two words

on a handful of occasions – her dialogue was well paced and she very much suited the live and let live nature of the character who is the only one of Penelope's children to show anything like genuine concern for her mother's well being, although even she lets her down with regard to the trip to Cornwall when she gets a better offer. She held her own in the chilly exchanges with Nancy and her acceptance of her mother's final wishes was well portrayed and her gentle playing in Nancy's reconciliation was a contributing factor in creating the right mood. All round this was a very watchable performance. The third of the siblings, Noel, was portrayed by David Stelfox and he was by far the most selfish of the three. His avaricious nature was well to the fore and unlike his sister Nancy he made no attempt to disguise the fact that his desire for his share of the money was for no other reason than he wanted it to spend and squander. His characterisation lacked subtlety, being very full on with little light and shade to it and was very much by the numbers and although at times his dialogue was a little stilted it was delivered with confidence and energy.

The supporting characters were all well cast and all contributed to the overall telling of the story. As Ellen, Penelope's no nonsense yet caring home help, Sue Cole produced a performance that was both warm and at times comedic. Her dialogue was brightly delivered in keeping with the character's upbeat attitude and the atmosphere always lifted a little when she was on stage. Ian Howland as Nancy's beleaguered husband George, who allows his wife's nagging to go over his head with a 'yes dear, no dear' attitude, gave a nicely underplayed performance and produced some truly comic moments most notable being when talking to the dog and his supporting Olivia at the reading of the will. Foster Barnett brought an air of *jouis de vive* to proceedings as the enlightened painter Lawrence Stern. The man's passion for his work and his love for his daughter were ably portrayed and clear for all to see and his carefree and likeable nature was like a breath of fresh air bringing a welcome relief from the otherwise serious subject matter. The character of Roy Brookner was played with sensitive authority by Roger Barker. Roger struck just the right tone as the gallery curator showing sympathy and understanding over Penelope's wishes for the fate of 'The Shell Seekers' and ultimately was another warm and likeable character. I wasn't sure at first if he was intended to be a con man, especially when he took the portfolio containing the sketches off stage (in order to help with the scene change) and cast what was supposed to be a caring glance back at the sleeping Penelope, but came across as a furtive glance over his shoulder as though he was stealing them. Doubling up in the roles of Danus the young gardener Penelope employs and Richard her wartime love was Keir Jones. He produced two contrasting performances as the confident army officer in love with the young Penelope and as the shy and meek gardener. As Danus his opening was a little contrived and not really naturalistic, perhaps due to the aforementioned hiatus with Penelope, but after that he settled into what was a well thought through performance. I particularly liked his playing of his first awkward encounter with Antonia and how he portrayed the character's growing confidence throughout. I thought he overcooked his reaction to Antonia's response – which seemed quite reasonable – to his revelation about his epilepsy, but his delivery was strong and confident. Another dual role performer was Sophie Robertson as the young Penelope 'Penny' and Antonia the daughter of Olivia's deceased boyfriend. Again she too showed good contrast between the two and hers was a slightly more daunting challenge given that there were many (intended?) similarities in both girls that they could easily have been confused by the audience as being the same person which would have made following the plot all the more confusing. Antonia was definitely the feistier of the two with more attitude, but she too played the shyness at her first exchange with Danus at just the right level preventing the scene from becoming too sugary. Penny's seeming naivety in her romance with the more experienced Richard was well played as was her carefree spirit obviously inherited from her father.

Overall this was an interesting production of a piece that was challenging to stage and required a lot of discipline on the part of all concerned. A good ensemble cast produced some high calibre individual performances with what was, given the potential of the story, a disappointing script that lacked pace, but still had high moments of comedy and pathos

Thank you for a most enjoyable evening and please pass on my congratulations to everyone involved. I hope that it proved to be a rewarding project from both an artistic and financial perspective for the company and I look forward to having the opportunity of attending your future productions.

Bill Edwards  
Regional Representative  
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31<sup>st</sup> March 2010

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