

**LOUGHTON AMATEUR DRAMATIC SOCIETY  
'VINCENT IN BRIXTON'  
FRIDAY 11<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2010  
LOPPING HALL, LOUGHTON  
BILL EDWARDS**

Nicholas Wright's play premiered in 2003 at London's National Theatre, where it was performed at the Cottesloe Theatre from where it transferred to the Playhouse Theatre in the West End and then later onto Broadway. Receiving a Tony Award nomination for Best Play and Winning the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play of that year, it offers a portrait of the artist as a young man, when at the age of 20 he came from Holland to London to work as a trainee art dealer, where he took lodgings in Brixton in 1873 and stayed for a couple of years before being transferred to Paris.

I must say here at the outset, that Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society (LADS) are to be very much congratulated, for their bravery in selecting what was a relatively hitherto unknown play, and what a gem it was that they uncovered, and how encouraging to see that their bravery was rewarded by a virtual full house on the evening I attended. I hope it was the same for the other performances, because it certainly deserved to be. This fictional interpretation of Van Gogh's brief stay in London and his relationship with the older, yet still attractive, widow Ursula Loyer with whom he lodged had all the intensity and passion that Van Gogh displayed in all of his paintings. As a NODA Rep it goes without saying that you get to see many shows throughout the course of any given year, some good, some not so good. However, one of the real bonuses of doing this job is that every once in a while you get to see a show or play that is truly exceptional, and this was one of those occasions. And just so we are clear that is not a quantified statement, because it was exceptional by any standard by which you might care to measure it.

Stephen Radley and Garry Cooper's superb Victorian kitchen/scullery set provided an excellent canvass (pardon the pun) against which the action was played out. The solid box set (no wobbly scenery here) looked authentic for the period, and from the solid butler sink and practical period taps dispensing running water, to the rustic farmhouse style tables and chairs to the practical Aga type range and large fire place with wooden mantel that dominated the upstage area, to the convincing rustic doors and realistic looking window over the sink, this spoke of a family house that whilst far from being on the poverty line was nonetheless not a wealthy one. The crème colouration of the walls was in keeping with the style of the characters that lived there – clean and respectable yet not ostentatious. It was clear that a great deal of thought, planning and hard work and gone into producing this set and it paid off, for this sturdy representation of Victorian London was so convincing that it almost became a character in its own right. The set dressing and properties under the responsibilities of Howard Platt and Roz Gerrie was every bit as impressive as the set itself and contributed greatly to the overall production. The attention to detail – the unfinished cherry border that Sam is painting, the period baby carriage, Van Gogh's drawing portfolio, the washing board and tongs, the mantelpiece bric-a-brac, the brass bellows beside the stove (I could go on) – was excellent. The fact that when Eugenie went to the sink to drain the peas for dinner, steam billowed from the pot as it was emptied was nothing short of amazing, as was the fact that the food for dinner was obviously edible and properly cooked

which must have taken some arranging. This may sound over the top, but so often these type of details are either ignored or dismissed, admittedly sometimes due to lack of resources, so that when a production comes along that takes the pains to get these things right it deserves to be applauded.

The high production values to which LADS work continued to be reflected in Christine Eckley's costume design. The observance of Victorian period and style in both the costumes and hairstyles (some of which I assume were wigs, it was difficult to tell) and the reflection of the various character's own personalities was excellent. Ursula's constant black attire due to her prolonged grieving for her lost husband and with greying hair, yet still a handsome woman, brought a visual gravitas and seriousness suited to the schoolteacher's disciplinarian attitude and her daughter Eugenie's more carefree nature was reflected in her less severe and more colourful and stylish dress sense. Van Gogh at first smart and businesslike as a representative of Goupil and Co. transitioning to being almost a tramp - his soaking clothes and hair because of the rain, when he returns to Hackford Road in Act IV another demonstration of the attention detail - as his passion for his work became all consuming to the exclusion of almost anything else. Sam Plowman's solid browns and greys and no nonsense dress reflecting his solid nature. Terry Tew's lighting design was insightful and atmospheric given that all of the action takes place in a basement kitchen. The sun pouring through the kitchen window at the beginning of Act II made an impact and was excellent in that not only did it convey a sense of time - a sunny afternoon - but also a real sense of what lay beyond the four walls of this room, the way the light cast through the window gave a strong feel that this was a kitchen below ground level. The kitchen's interior lighting had a subdued ambiance about it in keeping with the period when gas lighting was still prevalent prior to the onset of mass electrical lighting, a soft gold/straw rather than harsh tones gave the kitchen a warm almost cosy atmosphere and the subtle transitions of both darkening skies outside and darkening atmosphere in the kitchen at the onset of a coming storm were well coordinated and executed. Overall the lighting was excellent and contributed in no small part to the play's overall timbre.

I haven't seen any of Babs Oakley's work before, but if this production is anything to go by it is clear she knows her business. Her direction was adroit and assured and she orchestrated proceedings with a lightness of touch that ensured the narrative didn't become too heavy or leaden. She expertly allowed the rhythm of the dialogue to flow and find its natural tempo and cadence, whilst ensuring there was a crispness to the delivery that prevented the pace from becoming pedestrian and self indulgent. All movement was properly motivated and timed to draw the audience in to what was a fascinating story as the relationship between Vincent and Ursula unfolded and built to its powerful climax at the end of Act II. Any extraneous movement or temptation to over produce was resisted and she wisely avoided over egging the pudding as it were in not allowing too strong a sense of will they/won't they to permeate the story, but rather made it clear that it was inevitable that they would and drew the audience into the how and why, as the sexual tension between the two was slowly cranked up. It was clear she trusted in her actors and from the quality of the performances that she had intelligently allowed them the freedom to explore the characters and find their own sense of what made these people tick, whilst maintaining a gentle but firm guiding hand on the tiller.

The small ensemble cast were well chosen and all were physically suited to and believable in their allotted roles. They gelled together as an ensemble creating credible relationships and interaction. Their focus was of the highest order and they weren't phased or thrown even when some idiot's mobile phone went off in the middle of Act I. Dan Cooper turned in a powerful performance in the pivotal role of Vincent Van Gogh. He very much looked like a young Van Gogh and he made a very passable attempt at a Flemish accent, even if at times

it did sound a little affected. His forceful delivery was designed to convey the passion and at times arrogant attitude of the pastor's son but this was tempered with a softer more understated style in the more intimate scenes with Ursula or on the occasions when he realised he had gone too far with his uncompromising opinions and this dynamic was matched by his bearing and body language which gave for a consistency of performance that made the character very credible. His characterisation ably conveyed an opinionated young man trying to find his place in the world, who is endeavouring to succeed at something he neither wants to do nor is any good at and is on the verge of rebellion. This was not a subtle characterisation, but then Van Gogh's was not a subtle character. His chemistry with Ursula was almost palpable and as the two characters moved gradually towards the inevitable the stage virtually crackled with the sexual tension. This must have been a daunting role given how much Van Gogh's life has been documented but Dan turned in an excellent depiction of the young man who was to become the tortured soul many of us now know Van Gogh was. Speaking of tortured souls, as Ursula Loyer the long grieving widow with whom Van Gogh lodges, Cathy Naylor turned in a performance of exceptional quality. Obviously an actor of some experience Cathy immersed herself totally in Ursula's character as she slowly revealed her inner workings. Her enduring grief for her husband borne perhaps more out of a sense of propriety than love, which is at conflict with her deep routed hunger to still love and be loved both emotionally and physically and which she feels compelled to keep suppressed was skilfully and subtly conveyed in a performance so natural that at times I forgot I was watching an actor. Her giving into the latter as Vincent's forceful nature wins her over made for a powerfully passionate (some might say even erotic) image as she unbuttons her bodice as the curtains closed on Act II and the devastation she then feels in Act IV after his leaving was all too real. Her delivery was crisp and fresh (the French at the beginning of Act I was particularly impressive), and her projection strong and well modulated. Her body language and posture were also well suited to a woman of Ursula's station and circumstance and yet she moved smoothly around the stage with a relaxed grace. Overall this was an excellent performance from a very watchable actor.

Frances Dennis made for a tall imposing presence (and this is by no means a criticism) as her daughter Eugenie. Her desire to see her mother come to terms with her father's death and get on with her life and her desire to live her own life as she would wish and concern herself with less serious and more frivolous matters was at times a bone of contention with her mother however, she remains loyal to her in helping her to run the school and her later disdain for Anna Van Gogh was plain for all to see. Hers was another high calibre performance and her dialogue was clear, confident with a good dynamic and sense of meaning. I'm not sure of Frances' background but there were occasions when I detected a Welsh lilt in her accent, whether this was intentional or her own accent seeping through I'm not sure (I suspect the latter) but it made for incongruousness in the character's origins with that of her mother. Her body language was efficient yet refined as befitted a young woman who had to work but had still been brought up to be a lady and aspired to be such. Jon Gilbert as her eventual husband Sam Plowman, a very likeable and down to earth tradesman with dreams of becoming an artist, who is encouraged by Vincent, but who is more concerned with providing for his family, and has a very sensible line in homespun philosophy turned in a very watchable performance. Jon's dialogue was delivered in a matter of fact manner, and his grounded and nonjudgmental characterisation made Sam a very endearing character. His physicality was well suited to his trade and his energy and the way in which he attacked the dialogue never failed to lift the atmosphere whenever he was on stage, which contributed to the overall excellent dynamic of the play and made for what was a fine performance in a supporting role that shouldn't be underestimated. Lucy Parkin gave a solid performance and a duly annoying characterisation as Van Gogh's irritating younger sister Anna. Her dialogue was confidently delivered, however the Flemish accent did tend to wander somewhat which did make for an inconsistency with Vincent's given that they come

from the same place with the same upbringing, and her body language was suitably youthful and energetic for one given to doing a lot of house work, and it was totally believable that she would have got on the nerves of the other female members of the household.

Overall this was an intelligent and thought provoking production and a wonderful evening's entertainment that deservedly received warm and enthusiastic appreciation from the audience at the end, and the company are to be highly commended for the excellent standard of their achievement. I hope that the project proved rewarding for all of those involved and that it proved to be both an artistic and a financial success. I look forward to attending future productions and please accept my best wishes for the company's continued success.

Bill Edwards  
Regional Representative  
London Region  
District 6

30<sup>th</sup> August 2010

Visit [www.noda.org.uk](http://www.noda.org.uk) to learn more about NODA, the national organisation which looks after the interests of those involved in amateur theatre, and follow the links to the London Area and its societies. Sign up there as an Individual Member (£25.50 a year) to receive your own copy of the NODA National News (4 issues), the NODA London Magazine and the monthly email newsletter with breaking news, updates and special offers, and to get individual access to the Members' Area with NODA's advice on all matters from firearms and fund raising to child protection.