

GREATER MANCHESTER DRAMA FEDERATION

Society	CHADS
Title	<i>Communicating Doors</i>
Author	Alan Ayckbourn
Date & Time	21 May 2019, 19:45
Venue	CHADS

Production highlights:

- Strong ensemble playing and good characterisation.
- Much humour drawn out.

To think about for the future:

- Push the pace harder.
- More naturalistic playing.
- Better balance of casting.

THE PRODUCTION

Adjudicator writes and identifies themes, challenges and requirements, etc., and details the requirements and elements of the production in which he was particularly interested.

Alan Ayckbourn has always written strong parts for women. Many of his female characters need all their resilience to cope with bullying or obtuse males: in this case, a murderous henchman who has dispatched two of his boss's wives.

This story is wrapped up murder, corruption, time travel and a whiff of sex. With echoes of *Back to the Future*, Hitchcock, *No Sex Please We're British* and the Time Plays of JB Priestley, Ayckbourn tells us that foreknowledge enables us to alter our destiny. Ayckbourn's skill as a playwright means you are rarely confused by the play's structure, although you shouldn't try and make sense of it all.

The challenges are to ensure believable performances from the actors with tight pace and clear motivations. This needs to be married to sharply designed and operated technical and staging effects.

DIRECTION

Detailed study/knowledge and interpretation of the text; progressing the author's intent with creativity and sensitivity. Using theatrical dynamics to communicate with the audience. Appropriate delivery of the text using timing and rhythm. Settings with regard to focus, pace and groupings. Movement which is appropriate to the period and style of production. Creating atmosphere and mood to develop the full dramatic impact.

Director: Hamish Lawson

For me, directing involves three key skills.

- Firstly, a thorough understanding of the script and the situations and characters portrayed within. We are looking for a creative approach to the production and an interpretation with depth and insight.
- Secondly, the ability to draw out performances from actors, specifically physical fluidity, a natural voice, correct pace, clear delivery and believable interaction with other players. We should also see a firm understanding of motivation, pace and dynamics.
- Thirdly, the overlay and thorough integration of the technical aspects of the show: set, lights, sound, costume.

A good production must display at least two of these skills. An excellent production requires all three, blended together into a cohesive whole.

I think Hamish Lawson's skill as a director is as a "safe pair of hands". He clearly has a deep understanding of what's needed to bring a play like *Communicating Hands* to the stage: characters were firm, moves were good, the play was enjoyable and entertaining. But I didn't see a great deal of theatrical flair and there was an imbalance in performance style (not skill) which left me uneasy.

When preparing to direct theatre, whatever the genre, most directors would start with characterisation. These were firm and believable.

Theatrical dynamics in this production were good. To stage a scene successfully you must consider its rhythm and dynamics. There are moments where tension and atmosphere build, moments of activity, stillness, pauses and sections of higher and lower energy. These different elements were drawn into a cohesive whole. Blocking and movement were good. There was nothing that jarred and entrances and exits were well-drilled.

Very often, we saw actors who were slow in picking up cues, and this can be deadly. Pace did need picking up in the first act especially. We needed more lines over-lapping to really push the action along.

Hamish demonstrated a thorough understanding of the script and the situations and characters portrayed. Overall, he imbued a physical fluidity within his actors and enabled them to use a natural voice, clear delivery and believable interaction with other players.

A word or two about casting and acting styles. I understand that there is a perennial lack of leading ladies in their 20s and 30s. It's *essential* to the plot that Poopay is 33, or thereabouts—in the alternative future she is adopted from a children's home by Ruella as an early teenager, meaning that twenty years later, when she re-meets Reece, she will be in her mid-30s. This is no reflection *at all* on Kathryn Way's acting performance, and I hope she forgives me! There is no easy answer, I admit.

We also saw many different acting styles: Nigel Westbrook's easy naturalism; William Nolan's tongue-in-cheek humour; Joan Taylor-Jones' exaggerated drama. Whilst individually these performances were good, together they gave an odd imbalance to the play. Perhaps what *Communicating Doors* needs is a healthy dose of irony—it might have worked had all of the characters were played a little over-the-top, as with Ruella. The snatch from *Psycho* in this context would have worked better also—the opportunity to really ham it up was missed.

In conclusion, *Communicating Doors* is a sometimes uneasy mixture of drama, comedy and super-natural time travel. We need to see believable relationships and firm characterisation to enable the necessary suspension of disbelief. Hamish's direction achieved, on the whole, these requirements of good theatre.

ACTING

Characterisation which is believable shows flair, originality and understanding. Vocal technique which is appropriate to the play and is delivered with understanding and a good technique. Movement which is in character and in period and incorporating movement to deliver pace. Supporting ones fellow actor unselfishly and enhancing her performance. Using all available theatrical skills to make a noticeable contribution to the play.

Julian (Chris Rogerson)

Chris Rogerson gave credible performance as the suave but sinister Julian. He was firm on lines and showed a good physicality. But some areas need work, principally delivery and character. A play such as *Communicating Doors* demands a naturalism in delivery: if we can see that an actor is consciously acting then it's more difficult to believe their performance. I think the key issues here are tone and dynamics. Tone of voice is its 'colour' or emotional quality. We recognise what is being communicated through the tone of voice as much as the words themselves. Identify the emotion of your character at each given moment and make sure that your tone of voice matches the character's mood and what you need to communicate about their feelings. We each have a distinctive way of speaking and we vary vocal tone to make ourselves understood. Tackle dynamics by whispering, shouting, overlapping dialogue and understanding where pauses should fall. Julian is a psychopath, clearly, but the menace felt, at times, a little forced.

Poopay (Kathryn Way)

A nervy, vulnerable dominatrix, in sexy black leather, Kathryn Way understood fully the motivations of this difficult character: her instinct for survival against the odds. Lines were firm, characterisation was strong, interaction was generous: all key elements in a good acting performance. There was a real humour in lines such as "if this turns out to be a group booking..." but lines such as "there's no need to talk to me like that" and "shut your face" needed to be bigger, more forceful. Cues could have been tighter. Kathryn needs to consider how to emote without the over-used arms wide, palms up moves that she tended to use a lot—yes, acting is all about getting your message across, but a wider variety of physical moves would add to her considerable toolkit of skills. I also think Poopay should have been brighter, more assertive, cheeky and street-wise before being (believably) terrified out of her wits by the oily, menacing Julian. This

would have added colour to her characterisation. Her later scenes with Reece were touching and convincing.

Reece (Nigel Westbrook)

From his initial entry as a tottering old man on wobbly legs, hardly able to make it to the sofa, to his final scene as Phoebe's adoptive father, there was a warmth and authority to this character which was an absolute pleasure to watch.

Of course, when asking any actor to play the same part forty years apart there will be compromises. Plonking on a wig and pretending you're 30 will never work unless we totally suspend disbelief—such is the way this play is written. But Nigel has the self-confidence to come on stage in just his shorts. That itself is impressive!

Ruella (Joan Taylor-Jones)

The model of middle-class grit, strong, sensible and forthright. Echoes of Liza Goddard and Miranda Richardson here, in a strong, exaggerated performance which seemed to be sending up the play—and all the better for that.

Harold (William Nolan)

A peach of a role for William Nolan as the bemused, jobsworthy Brummie house detective: always conscious of his important responsibilities, yet totally confused about what is going on. Delicious.

Jessica (Mary Ellis)

Good support from the talented Mary Ellis: subtle, good-humoured, sprightly, authoritative and charismatic.

TECHNICAL

Set and props

A set which shows creativity and innovation and addresses the style of the production. Is well constructed. Props which are in period, authentic in appearance and placed strategically e.g. furniture.

With a functional bathroom with sink, bath and bidet, a window, a balcony, mini-bar, trick revolving door, two doors to the bathroom, one to the bedroom and a lockable door to the outside, CHADS' detailed and satisfying set was very well designed and

constructed. Using a free-standing revolve for the time machine did give us some wobbly moments and seemed to take an age to turn, but other than a semi-permanent structure there was probably no other solution. If the furniture and fittings seem unaltered over a forty year period, well that's posh hotels for you.

Be aware than the main suite door frame had a gap big enough to see cast members waiting for their cues.

Props were excellent. Perhaps the statuette in the UR corner could have been changed for each time period – there was a hidden exit and just enough blackout to enable this to have been worked successfully.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting and sound effects which contribute towards the dramatic potential, etc.

This production displayed a high level of technical invention and execution. Overall, the main set was lit well and imaginatively, warmth lighting in the main room, harsher white lighting in the bathroom, The lighting effects in the time machine—red for backwards in time, green for forward—worked well. Cues were handled acceptably.

Sound effects were good—distant gunfire, for example. There was no theme music. The house music seemed to be canned “lift muzak”, which was appropriate, even if unintentional. The unscripted clip from *Psycho* jarred.

Costumes, makeup and hair

Costumes which are in of the period, well fitting, colour co-ordinated and enhance characterisation. Make-up, hair and wigs which are in period and appropriate to the production (including size of venue) and assist in developing the character.

Costumes were all spot on: we gained a sense of the characters from the clothes they were wearing—Poopay's leather suit; Justin's turtle neck; Harold's RH jackets; Ruella's sensible wardrobe; Reece's cravat.

Wigs, too, were appropriate, although Harold looked very grey for 35. The stresses of hotel security, perhaps.

OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT

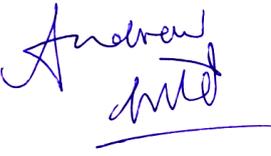
An excellent understanding of the author's intent. Direction which shows skill, originality, sensitivity and creativity using all the theatrical tools of pace, focus, delivery, timing and rhythm. Talented actors creating highly effective dramatic impact. Evidence of teamwork and unselfish ensemble playing. Actors who interact and react and a production team who use all resources to create atmosphere and mood.

There are four specific areas of focus when judging dramatic achievement: communication with the audience, realisation and interpretation of the text, dramatic impact and interaction between the actors.

- Communication with the audience—there was a strong understanding of theatrical communication and a creative use and operation of technology.
- Realisation and interpretation of the text—this was a good interpretation, fully satisfactory and holding our attention throughout.
- Dramatic impact—the expertise of this company is obvious. Dramatic impact was effective.
- Interaction between the actors—standards of movement were high. Spoken lines had appropriate pace, excellent clear delivery, good characterisation and no prompts. There was a high standard of performance from everyone, despite the imbalance in acting styles.

In conclusion, although *Communicating Doors* is perhaps “just another” Ayckbourn it does have some wise observations that women, far more than men, have the capacity to be agents of change.

Although CHADS didn't give us a block-buster, their production was solid, enjoyable and full of star quality.

Adjudicator (print)	Andrew Wild
Adjudicator (sign)	
Date	24 May 2019