



Society : Quince Players  
Production : Stepping Out  
Date : Friday 12 May 2006  
Venue : The Cordes Hall, Sunninghill, Berkshire  
Report by : Kim Halliday  
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## Report

Once again, I'd like to start by thanking Quince Players for inviting me to review this production. Having both directed and appeared in several productions of this particular comedy, I am extremely well versed in the antics of Richard Harris's wonderfully observed cross-section of aspiring tappers.

**NATALIE BOARDMAN (Lynne).** *Lynne* is rather an 'non-entity' in the run of things in that she has the least amount of lines to say amongst the class participants, but nevertheless, she has an important (and very sad) part to play. Although Natalie's tender years meant that she was probably in real life too young to be a nurse (the script puts *Lynne* at 19), this was a very confident performance, and Natalie brought out the caring side of her character very well.

**SUE BISH (Vera).** *Vera* is an absolute dream part for any women 'in her prime' to play and Sue was perfectly cast as the bossy, interfering, and completely insensitive housewife. As well as delivering her lines well and with purpose, Sue also gave us some superbly disdainful facial expressions and she was also able to display *Vera*'s sadder side during her 'photograph' monologue with perfect reflection. Well done, Sue – another well-observed characterisation.

**ANNE ROBINSON (Maxine).** Although Anne looked good in her vast array of leotards and leggings as flashy shopkeeper *Maxine*, sadly her nerves appeared to get the better of her at the start, and a lot of her dialogue was lost or rushed. Although she improved in the second act, as she grew in confidence – especially during her 'we two are alike' dialogue with *Andy* – overall, I don't think Anne was nearly forceful enough as the self-named 'Maxine the Mouth'.

**NICK TEALE (Geoffrey).** As the only 'guy' in the class, *Geoffrey* is meant to be a bit of a wimp, and Nick managed to convey this to us convincingly, looking suitably uncomfortable and leaving us feeling very embarrassed for him. Although, like some of the others, a little more volume to his dialogue was needed at times, I thought that overall Nick gave us a very good characterisation, especially when *Geoffrey* finally has the courage to 'break out of his mold' in the final scene. There was some neat footwork going on, too, in the final dance. Well done, Nick, on your debut performance – I hope to see more outings for you on the QP stage!

**REBECCA WIRE (Andy).** The part of *Andy* requires an actress who is able to convey that she is concealing a whole lot of emotion which eventually explodes in the final scene and I think Becca carried this off superbly, displaying the vulnerability of *Andy* extremely well. She also played the part of the abused housewife convincingly – nervous at every turn and trusting no-one, keeping herself well covered up. And her scenes with *Geoffrey* had just the right 'look' to make us draw our own conclusions regarding their blossoming relationship. Beautifully done, Becca!

**HEATHER RADFORD (Dorothy).** Heather kept her natural Canadian accent for *Dorothy*, which took a while to get used to, but I think she did well in her portrayal of this very downtrodden character. She maintained this characterisation throughout and her confusion and bewilderment during the final scene with *Sylvia* was spot on, leaving us all feeling very sorry for her. Another well thought out characterisation.

**DENISE ALLEN-HUGHES (Sylvia).** I have a real soft spot for *Sylvia*, as this is the character I've played in the past, so I suppose you could say I know her 'inside out'! She's a chirpy, bubbly, larger-than-life character and I must say, Denise portrayed her with perfect accuracy tonight (think *Vicky Pollard* from 'Little Britain'!). She was loud and garishly 'OTT' as she chewed her way through countless packs of gum, whilst displaying her talents for comic timing, and perfectly 'faking' her inaccuracy at tap dancing during the classes but excelling in the finalés. Although – like Natalie – Denise was a little too young in real life to play married *Sylvia*, I think her confidence and vitality more than made up for this and she did *Sylvia* proud!

**LORNA BYE (Rose).** *Rose* is always the most difficult part to cast in 'Stepping Out' as it is written for a West Indian, African, Caribbean or similar ethnic character and it is usually the inability to cast this role accurately that puts societies off staging the play. Tonight, the Director had cast *Rose* as a tall, loud obviously white Cockney, and although Lorna gave us a confident and almost faultless performance tonight, I'm not sure that it worked. Some of the dialogue had obviously been changed to accommodate the difference in 'ethnicity', and I think a lot of the humour was therefore lost, especially those relating to religion and colour. This wasn't Lorna's fault, however, as I think she did as much with the part as a Caucasian could have, and gave a very commendable QP debut performance.

**LYNDA HUGHES (Mavis).** *Mavis* is central to the plot, and needs to be able to hold everything together as the 'old pro' who didn't quite make it, convincing us she would have been up there with the best had her life not turned out the way it did. I think Lynda managed to do this just perfectly, keeping her class in order and managing to convince us she really was the dance teacher with all too many hidden problems. This is a very wordy part which has been known to trip up many an actress, but I didn't notice any errors in Lynda's delivery of the script, which was clear and well-projected. And full marks too, for managing to compose and perform *Mavis's* freestyle dance in class and also for both choreographing and taking part in the finalé numbers – especially when suffering from back problems! A first class performance, Lynda!

**HEATHER KING (Mrs Fraser).** Right from the start, Heather had us convinced that she was, indeed, the baggy-stockinged, cardigan-wearing, fruit-eating, piano playing Northerner *Mrs Fraser*. Sporting woolly hat, twin set and brogues, and a wandering gait superbly observed and presented, she delivered some extremely dry and amusing asides, as her character dictated. She also managed to play a convincing 'drunk' during the final scene, which isn't as easy as it looks! Although not a piano-player, Heather's miming was as convincing as her acting. Well done, Heather!

**DIRECTION (Ken Long).** As a Director, one of the key things required to ensure that you get a good performance of this particular play is to make sure you select the 'right' people for the parts and that they understand fully the 'inside-the-head' of their particular characters. Although there were some good, solid, performances on show tonight, I'm not too sure whether this was achieved with everyone. Some chunks of dialogue also appeared to have been omitted or changed either to reflect a change of character or (I assume), so as not to offend. This meant that a lot of amusing lines were lost and *Andy's* expletive lost a lot of its impact being 'watered-down' – it's written as it stands in order to show how angry *Andy* is feeling – she would never utter that word except under severe duress. There were also lots of problems with blocking, especially during the first Act, when dialogue delivered from the back of the set was lost, and the dialogue was rushed at times, although this may have been down to nerves.

**CHOREOGRAPHY (Lynda Hughes).** Some of the choreography in 'Stepping Out' is already set in the script, especially the tap steps done in class, so it is difficult to meander from these. The real chances to 'pull out all the stops' choreography-wise are therefore in the two finalé dances. The first dance needs to be simple, yet effective, and I thought Lynda had used her mixed-ability cast well, bringing their characters to each of the moves, yet building on the enthusiasm they would have felt at the first dress rehearsal. The more polished final dance to '42<sup>nd</sup> Street' was a real show-stopper, and displayed a level of choreography and dancing that would have befitted any cabaret venue. Two very different, yet very well set pieces, Lynda – well done!

**LIGHTING (Peter Fitzwater).** It is always something of a challenge to catch Peter out, and I am very happy to say that he beat me on this one! An excellent performance, as usual, Peter; the lighting was sympathetic to the setting, and all cues were met nicely – special mention must go to the perfect co-ordination with *Mrs Fraser's* 'switching off the lights' in Act 1.

**SOUND (Dennis Golding).** A good and appropriate selection of music for the production, and effective FX, all delivered at nicely pitched levels. I most appreciated, however, the routing of the piano sound through the on-stage speakers – it is always so distracting having sound coming at the audience from completely the wrong direction. Dennis also got around the problem of co-ordinating music with *Mrs Fraser's* miming by playing much of it himself on a keyboard in the technical gallery... a sensible and appropriate solution to a technical and artistic problem. A good performance from the Sound department!

**STAGING AND SCENERY (Mike Kelly and Crew).** The script for this particular play provides quite a good scenery plan, and there are obvious doors and windows that need to be set in certain places. After staring at the set for a few moments at the start, I began to realise that we were looking at an almost exact replica of the Cordes Hall! The walls were the same colour, as were the curtains, and even the light fittings matched (although I noticed two missing from the walls Front of House!)! There was even a replica of the memorial plaque on the back wall of the set! The fire doors were impressively constructed, too, adding to the effect that this really was a village hall venue. There were few prop changes to be made, although it would have been nice for the notices on the notice board to have been changed more frequently, to indicate the passing of time. This is a minor gripe, though, as everything else looked so perfect! Mike, you really have excelled yourself this time... Top marks all round!

**COSTUMES (Dianne Gosden).** When attending the tap class, everyone looked in character and comfortable with what they were wearing, especially *Vera* in her long boots and expensive-looking clothing and *Andy* in her various scarves and long jumpers. *Sylvia* looked wonderfully lurid in her animal print leggings and varied t-shirts, whilst *Geoffrey's* 'busy' pullover was just perfect. The finale costumes looked good, although I think the second finale dance would have had more impact if in the first one, the cast were kitted out with striped blazers, as indicated in the script (the pink tailcoats looked too 'perfect'). My main concern, however, is what happened to the comical hats in *Maxine's* cardboard box??? So much comedy mileage can be gained from using a variety of party hats (e.g. Stetsons, Indian headdresses, Viking helmets, chicken-hat, etc.) instead of the drab ones used tonight, and I felt the whole scene lost something of it's humour as a result.

**HAIR and MAKE UP.** Generally, everyone looked in character tonight and make up looked natural under the lights. *Andy* looked particularly dowdy with her lank hair and unflattering specs, whilst *Maxine* and *Vera* were beautifully over made-up. I did wonder whether *Sylvia* would have worn her glitter lashes to EVERY class she attended, though. And I was puzzled why *Vera* wore such an obvious styled wig, when I know Sue's hair would have looked equally as good, and far

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more natural. In contrast, *Rose*'s wig looked far too realistic and credible in the first Act: it's supposed to be ill-fitting and an obvious 'rug'.

**PROGRAMME.** Tonight's programme was a glossy A5 brochure with a wonderful picture of the cast in tailcoats on the cover. The photographs of the cast were studio quality and the cast resumés were interesting. I was pleased to see that this time the advertising, although abundant, had been limited to the inside covers or left hand pages of the programme and a nice touch was the inclusion of photographs of the cast in costume and also the information piece on QP's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was also good to see mention of Quince Players' affiliation to NODA complete with the correct logo. For brief information pieces on NODA, which are suitable for inclusion in programmes, check out the Members' Area of the NODA website <http://www.noda.org.uk>.

**FRONT OF HOUSE.** Once again, I received a warm and friendly welcome from the Front of House team at the Cordes Hall, and because it was a warm night, we could spill out of the bar area with our drinks and ice creams, leaving the small bar area less cramped.

To sum up, this was a good production of a very complicated play, both to cast and to direct, and there were some good individual contributions both from those on stage and those behind the scenes. I apologise if I've been a little bit overcritical at times, but as I said, having performed in, directed, and seen numerous productions of this particular play, it is a firm favourite of mine, and I have a very clear idea of what the author intended. I feel that it is important that these guidelines are adhered to where possible.

Good luck with rehearsals for 'Smiley Nights' and keep up the good work!

**Kim Halliday**