

NODA Review

SEPARATE TABLES

performed by Viva at The Methodist Hall Soham

Directed by Mary Barnes

“Loneliness is a terrible thing, don’t you agree.” That sentiment is expressed by one of the lonely characters in Terence Rattigan’s *Separate Tables*, a collection of two one-act plays set at the Beauregard Hotel in Bournemouth. The plays examine people driven by loneliness into desperate situations. The leading roles in both acts were originally written to be played by the same actors. For the 1958 film version Rattigan and co-screenwriter John Gay combined the plays into one complete story with different actors playing the four leading roles.

The 1950s were a very different time from today but that world was wonderfully recreated by Director **Mary Barnes** and her talented cast and production team. The attention paid to detail in this production was laudable from having the crafted Hotel Beauregard sign over the entrance door to recreating the hotel dining room together with a small lounge area. **Vicki Jelleyman**’s costumes help set the proper period mood whilst hair (**Angela Schumann** and **Tara Gilbey**) and properties (**Gail Baker** and **Rob Barton**) including serving numerous mouthwatering hot meals, carried the period through.

With the audience sitting either side of the acting area, you sat like a fly-on-the-wall to quietly observe the lives of those staying at the Beauregard Hotel.

The hotel regulars (who appear in both plays) are all character parts, taken on by the cast with obvious relish, bringing Rattigan’s wonderful characters to life, imperfections and all. Strong performances from **Kate Nolan** as Mrs Railton-Bell, full of airs and graces and moral indignation; **Anthea Kenna** as the kind and placatory Lady Matheson; Mr Fowler (**David Tickner**) retired academic desperately endeavouring to keep in touch with his old boys; **Kirsten Martin** as the dotty, politically incorrect and gambling Miss Meacham; and the young couple Jean and Charles played by **Danielle Swanson** and **Scott Robertson**.

The first play, *Table by the Window* involves John Malcolm, a disgraced former politician, now a left-wing journalist and alcoholic, whose ex-wife Anne has tracked him down to Bournemouth after her second marriage has ended in divorce. It’s been 8 years since they divorced but their passion has not cooled. Caught in the middle is the attractive, compassionate and insightful hotel manager, Miss Cooper who is in a relationship with John which doesn’t have the same ardour although it is meaningful for her. **Rob Barton** was excellent as John Malcolm unable to cope with his current situation but flattered to be needed again by Anne played with great style by the statuesque **Jenny Tayler-Surridge**.

Table Number Seven is set 18 months later. It’s the story of Major Pollock, a pompous braggart attempting to hide a nasty secret. Here we enjoyed another excellent performance this time from **Rowan Maulder** as Pollock. Sibyl, Mrs. Railton-Bell’s downtrodden and nervous 30 year old spinster daughter has formed a kinship with the Major. Sibyl was superbly played by the very versatile **Kerry Hibbert**. Her stunned shock and subsequent reaction to the newspaper article denouncing the Major was a masterclass in itself.

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Overseeing the machinations of the guests and the hotel staff was **Chloe Grimes** as Hotel Manageress Pat Cooper. Ms Grimes gave an absolutely excellent performance throughout. The hotel has three very disparate waitresses. The elderly and shaky Janet (**Julie Kowalczyk**), the belligerent Mabel (**Kate Weekes**) and the bouncy and forthright Doreen (**Sarah Shorney**). These three were marvellous interacting with the “guests” showing us to our seats and serving tea and cakes to everyone in the interval. Three splendid characterisations. Keeping it local (as it’s Viva) completing the cast of *Table Number Seven* was The Reverend Colin and Mrs Watkins as The Casuals.

Separate Tables is rarely produced and isn't an easy play. Full of complex characters and challenging dialogue this was a real achievement by all concerned in producing a good, solid, old-fashioned and very enjoyable piece of theatre.

Julie Petrucci

Regional Representative NODA East District 4 South.