

Dry Rot

By AF Harrold

The farce revolves around the attempt by an unscrupulous gang of bungling bookies to nobble a horse race and make a packet. Do the Shinfield Players Theatre group deserve to make a packet out of this production? Read on.

Dry Rot @ the Shinfield Players Theatre, Friday 12 May 2006

This is the sort of farce some of the finer Ealing Comedies did so memorably.

The action takes place in a country hotel which has recently come into the possession of a retired Colonel and his family and our anti-heroes are the first guests to stay there. The atmosphere is awkward since the Colonel wishes he could run a hotel without the inconvenience of any guests and the country bumpkin maid who came along with the establishment is the sort of butter-fingered noble savage who can only infuriate the old man even more – in a prototypical Basil/Manuel relationship.

There's also a sub-plot of the Zeppo Marx variety, whereby the Secretary of our leading horse doper, who is in disguise as a member of the aristocracy, is involved in an entirely spurious romantic entanglement with the Colonel's daughter.

The impressive set has half a dozen entrances, including a secret panel in the wall and a set of stairs made treacherous by the dry rot of the title, which is obviously an essential set up for a correctly frantic farce, as are incidents of mistaken identity in the night, falling trousers, fast talking and vanishing drinks. It's all there in the script.

Heidi Ashton plays a visiting police officer with a fair degree of fervour, entirely befuddled and clueless about the situation she finds herself in, without ever falling into a clumsy Clouseau burlesque, and Sian Ellmes gives her all as Beth the peculiar chamber maid, alternately disconcertingly familiar to her employers and coquettishly winsome with the young man she casts her eye on.

At the centre of the piece though is the bravura performance by Martin Hood, as Alf Tubbe the nobbler disguised as a nob, and Mike Franklin, as his side-kick, Fred Phipps, disguised as the gentleman's valet. This pair worked astonishingly well together, rattling their lines off like machine guns or tennis partners. They were consistently funny, bringing their parts to life with welcome inspiration. Hood in particular played his part with a sort of Bob Hoskins glee that was a delight to behold. And Franklin opted for an air of generous and genuine stupidity that never quite seemed overdone.

All in all a rollercoaster of a play with some very bad puns, a pair of trousers that fall down halfway through and some very enjoyable acting.