

Society : Wargrave Theatre
Production : Rules for Living
Date : 23/10/24
Venue : Woodclyffe Hall, Wargrave, Berkshire
District : 13
Reviewer : Cate Naylor

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Show Report

What a riotous night I had as I joined Wargrave Theatre for their production of Rules for Living. The play which sees a very dysfunctional family stagger through their preparations for Christmas dinner explores the premise that everyone has their own ways of coping with difficult situations (a set of rules that enables them to do things that they are uncomfortable with). As the play progressed, each of the rules became more detailed and led to increasing levels of comedy. Within the play is an hilarious family game of Bedlam which absolutely became bedlam as the complicated rules and the rules of living became intertwined with the game. All of the cast were brilliant and kept the pace and physicality going for the entire play. On a more serious note, whilst the play is very funny, there were also some deeper more poignant messages interwoven into the dialogue giving food for thought about family dynamics.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Jasper Holmes gave a great performance as younger son Matthew who brought his girlfriend along for the family Christmas meal whilst 'not so secretly' fancying his brother's wife Sheena. His rule 'you must sit and tell a lie, led to some lovely physical theatre and the hilarity continued as his rule became 'sit and eat to tell a lie'. Jasper coped so well with all the eating and lying and managed to continue to deliver his lines clearly through a range of mince pies, crisps and other festive food! He had lovely characterisation and clearly showed his confusion over his feelings for Amber and Sheena.

Amber Gould was loud and lovely as Matthew's girlfriend Carrie who 'invited herself' to the family Christmas. Her rule to stand and then dance, to tell a joke brought a lot of laughter as her jokes came at the most inopportune moments. She had lovely clear diction and communicated very well, although initially, she tended to speak out to the audience rather than to her fellow actors. Turning a quarter turn to the person you are speaking to would look more natural whilst still ensuring that the

audience could hear your lines. As the evening progressed, Carrie became more disillusioned with Matthew and jealous of his relationship with Sheena and Amber communicated this very clearly.

Emmajane Hughes playing Adam's wife Sheena had the unenviable task of explaining her daughter's chronic fatigue and cognitive behavioural therapy whilst the chaos of Christmas was going on around her. Turning to Matthew her brother-in-law, for help she showed lovely changes of expression as she battled with herself over this situation and the impact it was having on her marriage. Following her rule to drink and contradict she became increasingly more 'intoxicated', but still managed to keep her diction and line delivery clear.

Andy Scott as the older son, Adam was going through a bad patch with his wife and trying to make out all was well to the rest of the family. His grumpiness about his situation shone through all the mayhem of his rule to affect an accent and then name call to mock the others. He seamlessly changed accents and added mocking names leading to increasing annoyance from the other characters. His jealousy of his brother led to arguments and petty behaviour between the two with an ultimate descent into childhood bickering which was very believable.

Heading the family was Edith played by **Grace Tye**. Always wanting the best for her sons and her stricken husband; she glossed over the problems in the family and pretended that they were not happening. Grace threw herself into the character, providing much of the comedy in the first act with her compulsion to clean when she felt stressed. It was an hilarious performance, making the character seem wonderfully real, and she was so natural in her obsessive cleaning. When she then had to self-medicate as well as clean, she did it so naturally that is just added to her character. Such a clever and impactful performance.

At the end of Act 1 we met Francis, Edith's husband played by **Joe Haynes**. Having just had a stroke which also affected his speech, Joe communicated only with grunts and facial expressions but left us in no doubt at all what he was thinking. His flirting with Carrie was hilarious and he had some very lecherous looks. Joe had worked hard on the natural physicality and posturing of a stroke patient and maintained this for the entirety of the second act. His handling of the knife was very funny, even more so as he did it beautifully in character.

At the end of the play, there was a quick appearance from Emma (Sheena and Adam's daughter) played by **Sophie Monte**. Coming down from her bedroom into the bedlam that was Christmas, and delivering just a few lines, it was clear that she was ready to change her own outlook on her life, a lesson that the rest of the family could learn!

Creatives

Christine Christie (Director) assisted by **Joy Haynes** (Producer)

Christine and Joy must have worked very hard with the cast as they never strayed from the rules, gradually adding more and more elements. Together they developed very believable characters and relationships, although it was clear that they had no intention of tolerating one another's opinions. The energy and passion from the entire cast was shown through the frustration and anger of this dysfunctional family at breaking point. As the situation began to unravel, it was quite obvious that the family home was the last place any of them really wanted to be! The directors and the cast kept the pace going and the emotions running high concluding in a family food fight!

Sheila Williams (Set Design and Painting) with **Dave Robinson, Henry Marchant and Mark Cox** (Set Construction)

The set was a very impressive kitchen complete with a large dresser, dining table and eyelevel oven. There were Christmas decorations galore and a Christmas tree with presents and stockings. The kitchen was beautifully designed and painted and had a warmth about it unlike the family dynamics.

Dave Robinson (Projectionist) The screen was set front stage left with the rules projected onto it. Each time a rule was introduced or developed, it was accompanied with a ping to draw our attention to the rule and to the characters so that we could watch their mannerisms and see their body language change with each rule.

Peter Knowles (Sound) The sound effects were well cued and appropriate. We began with some jolly Christmas music which led us nicely into Christmas Day and the telephone rings were perfectly timed with the cast pickups.

Simon Calverley (Lighting)

The stage was well lit with no areas of darkness at the edges. The warmth of the light and subtle changes worked well for the changes in mood in the play.

Celia Reinbolt, Joy Haynes and Dave Robinson (Props)

The set was full of props, and it must have been quite a task to collect them all together! Lots of crockery and glasses, a very large turkey and many vegetables, not to mention all the Christmas decorations. I was pleased to see that there was liquid in the bottles and of the right colour for each of the very many drinks and real food for Matthew to eat. It must have been quite a task to sort out and re-set the stage after the food fight at the end of the show!!

Members of the Cast (Costumes)

The costumes worked well for each of the characters, suiting their personalities and roles. Carrie really rocked the Christmas look with her red party dress and festive hairband and Emma's red pyjamas were a lovely contrast to the day wear of the rest of the cast.

Clive Dow (Fight Director)

The cast must have been glad to have an expert to guide them through the family fight which was comedic and silly without being too over the top. I could see lots of stage fighting techniques well demonstrated by the cast.

Thank you so much for the invitation to join you for this funny play and to Ann, Chez and the front of house team for welcoming me. I really enjoyed my first visit to see your adult performers having missed your summer show and I look forward to joining you again next year.

Cate

NODA London District 13 Representative

