

A Bunch of Amateurs

by **Ian Hislop and Nick Newman**

Canterbury Repertory Theatre

Elmwood Auditorium

Reviewed by **Jordon Jones** for Backstage Christchurch - Theatre Reviews

I've always been a bit of a sucker for plays about putting on plays, and *A Bunch of Amateurs* is no exception. It's a light comedy based around a fictional production of *King Lear*, which provides a lot of opportunities for tonal contrast. Several of the cast members in this play were in Repertory's own production of *King Lear* several years ago, which I was also involved in, and the opportunity to see the actors revisit the familiar material in a new light was irresistible.

A Bunch of Amateurs tells the story of a tiny amateur dramatic society, the Stratford Players, as they fight to keep afloat in the face of imminent shutdown. In a desperate attempt to bring in some much-needed sponsorship, the company manages to get hold of Jefferson Steel, a Hollywood action star who's losing his touch and could use some good publicity for once. Steel, under the impression that he's being asked to play *King Lear* to adoring crowds in Stratford-upon-Avon, is bitterly disappointed by the run-down, small-town peacefulness he meets in a Suffolk Stratford which is very decidedly not upon any Avon. Tensions run hot from the get-go, but the arrival of Jessica Steel, Jefferson's daughter, and the eager involvement of the sponsor's wife in the production set the wheels of high drama firmly in motion.

The moment I walked into the auditorium and laid eyes upon the set, I felt right at home. One corner of the stage depicted the interior of a bed and breakfast, but the rest of the space was dedicated to the rehearsal rooms of the Stratford Players inside a repurposed barn. The barn doors were painstakingly handcrafted, but the assorted furnishings were the sorts of familiar odds and ends inevitably collected by theatre groups as years pass: an umbrella stand filled with whatever props will fit, a large basket that had almost certainly seen better days onstage at some point, the ubiquitous black wooden boxes. I particularly loved the attention given to the collection of posters depicting previous shows from the Stratford Players—eagle-eyed audience members who have attended Repertory shows in the past are guaranteed to pick up on some delightful references.

I don't want to risk spoilers about the final scene, so all I will say about the set and lighting used therein is that they were absolutely gorgeous—very well done to Brenda Hayes and Pim van Duin for their work on the set design and to Ian Harding for the lighting.

One of the biggest strengths of the production was the cohesion of the cast. The easy chemistry between the longstanding members of the Stratford Players was a delight to watch. The eclectic combination of boundlessly enthusiastic Dennis (Andrew Bell), Nigel the genteel stuffed shirt (John Caldwell), sunny and optimistic Mary (Ursula Cheer), and their passionate miracle worker of a director, Dorothy (Elayne Buckler) created a vibrant ensemble to serve as the foundation of *A Bunch of Amateurs*.

There were some lovely and occasionally tender moments between Jefferson Steel (Mike Adams) and his daughter Jessica (Ollianda Clinton) as they began to tentatively find connection in performing together. Their relationship is a key emotional cornerstone of the play, and the parallels between the Steels and the tension between Lear and his own youngest daughter serve the piece well.

As Lauren, the wife of King Lear's sponsor who has her eye on the stage, Emma McBride was chic and professional. Rounding out the cast was Tony Carrabes, who makes several appearances as a journalist out for Jefferson Steel's blood (metaphorically, one hopes, but who can say with the media?).

The real heavy hitters of the show, however, were the two leads. Buckler was in truly fine form as Dorothy; her performance was riveting from start to finish. Her heartfelt speeches were full of pathos, which she contrasted with a cheeky irony in the lighter moments of wrangling the three-ring circus of the Stratford Players. Buckler has phenomenal stage presence, and you can really see her personal passion for the stage shining through in her performance.

Quite simply, Mike Adams made a fantastic Jefferson Steel. Not only could he expertly balance Hollywood charm with Hollywood petulance, but he also used his own experience with the role of Lear to inform both his performance as Steel and that of Steel-as-Lear (so many layers!). As Steel began to understand and internalise the character of Lear in his lowest points, Adams got to really show off his chops, delving into the intense characterisation that served him so well the last time he played the mad king.

A Bunch of Amateurs is, above all, a love letter to community theatre. It highlights the passion and the camaraderie that drives us to reach for the impossible and take a chance on the improbable, the hours and sweat and tears that are poured into creating a piece of art with whatever we can get our hands on. Being able to share this expression of love for theatre with the community is one of the great joys of performing, so take advantage of the opportunity to become a part of the fun and come along to the show.