

When the director and/or anyone else who was involved in the decision to present this play first came up with the idea I wonder if they realised just how difficult a task they were setting the company. I say that because on first acquaintance this looks like a far more straightforward play than it actually is. It is described as a comedy but it neglects to tell you that it has many farcical elements, which make it that much harder to hit just the right level of humour and keep it flowing freely. There is nothing to tell you that most of the characters are pretty standard types and move mainly along predictable lines. You are, therefore, heavily reliant on strong direction that can introduce clear inventive business when needed and acting of a very high standard to make often ordinary dialogue and jokes come up fresh. I mention these things because it is against this background and bearing in mind these difficulties that I write my adjudication.

The sound team started proceedings off with a nicely sung 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen', dog noises offstage left and carol singers and a door bell offstage right all of which dovetailed immaculately. The car and telephone noises at an appropriate level were also expertly cued and delivered. Twice Helen went to the hatch and talked to the dog but before either piece of action we had not heard anything from the said animal. While the early offstage business was being worked through we had time to take in the well-lit set. Those two coloured walls picking up the colours of the three-piece suite and the less violent shades of the floral curtains. This colour scheme was rather like the inhabitants of the house a mixture of personalities, full of opinions many of which were not fully digested or thought through. I know it would have added to the production budget but a bigger Christmas tree was required. The one produced was hardly large enough to have got itself stuck in the doorway.

'Most Wonderful Time of the Year' provided a good scene-filler as Martin, Goff and Margaret and Helen formed a bucket-chain to clear the supermarket bags off stage. This was a good piece of business carried out effectively, ending perfectly on cue as the song finished. The lighting team came up trumps with the flickering lights on the tree prior to them fusing the whole house. The change from scenes 1 to 2 set on a darkened stage was swiftly done with little fuss or bother. When the lights came up on the new scene they were ideally set to give the impression of daylight coming through the now open curtains in contrast to the artificial light of the previous evening. Just one thing missing was a lighting source on stage. It is always good to know where the light comes from in a room when it is evening or night. I rather question the wisdom of the tree lights being on at this time of day particularly after the problems they had caused the previous evening.

The introduction of 'Merry Christmas Everyone' once again provided a good cover as you moved forward from scene 2 to 3. More good work from the lighting team with that silent TV set with its flickering pictures showing onto Helen and Martin's faces as they sat in the chairs downstage right. The ending of Act 1 was one of the places where it was difficult to hit the right balance between comedy and farce. The over-exaggerated all-round response to the dog's release of wind rather upset the balance of power. Was there a reason for the rather long pause after the bell had called the audience back for the start of Act 2? I did notice that one party returned very late after the interval and perhaps that was the reason. If there was no excuse then the audience waited too long for proceedings to start.

Devoid of its pine needles the Christmas tree provided a lovely visual joke to start off the new Act. There were a couple of places where the author let things down. He was asking too much of any player to get that drunk that quickly and respond so fully after drinking just one albeit large glass of Potheen. And the giving and receiving of presents took far too long slowing down the action, which had built up a good head of steam. A suitable change of

light for scene 3 was ideal for late afternoon/early evening but the shadows from the window frame on the cloth outside at the back of the stage was a little disconcerting. Taken all over, however, this was technically a well presented production. I will write discussion of wardrobe and personal appearances under individual performances. There was plenty of attack and drive in the direction and playing and those moments when the play did not flow with any freedom or consistency can be laid more often at the door of the author than the company.