

The Hollow

Agatha Christie

society/company: Banbury Cross Players (directory)

performance date: 20 Apr 2016

venue: The Mill Arts Centre, Spiceball Pk Road, Banbury, OX16 5QE

reviewer/s: Alex Wood (Independent review)

This Agatha Christie novel was adapted for the stage in 1951 and is very much in the style of the country house drama of the time.

Former diplomat, Sir Henry Angkatell, and his rather scatterbrained wife Lucy are hosting a weekend for family and friends. Henrietta, Sir Henry's cousin is a sculptor who also lives at the house and the three are joined by Midge Harvey, a cousin who has opted to be independent, having a job in a dress shop and Edward Angkatell, a cousin of independent means who lives at Ainswick, Lucy's home when she was younger. The family are joined by Dr John Cristow - an unlikeable character - and his rather dim wife, Gerda.

They make for an uneasy party and things get trickier when film star Veronica Cray - an old flame of Dr Cristow's - arrives uninvited just before dinner. That evening Cristow pays a visit to Veronica (who has rented a cottage nearby), for 'old times sake', arriving back in the early hours of the next morning. She visits the next morning determined to make him leave his wife.

Shortly after she leaves, vowing that if she can't have him no-one else will, Dr Cristow is shot dead by an unseen hand and a gun is thrown in his direction. Gerda, his wife enters and picks up the gun, which is in her hand as others arrive....

I thought the Banbury Cross Players did very well with this piece. The acting was of a high standard with no weak links. I especially enjoyed Tara Lacey's portrayal of Henrietta Angkatell as well as John McCormick as the irascible Sir Henry. Janice Lake worked hard as Lady Lucy, though I felt she could be a little more dotty and similarly I thought that while Lauren Dunn's portrayal of Gerda Cristow was good, her character could have been a little more clueless.

Nik Lester was excellent as Gudgeon, the family butler, who was seriously attentive to his duties but with a nice sense of comedy. I also thought Debby Andrews got the character of Doris, the trainee maid - the subject of an interesting social comment by Gudgeon who bemoans the days when girls from estate families who knew the form took on such duties - just right. The introduction of Inspector Colhoun (Roger Riley) during the interval was a clever idea which added to the 'whodunnit' atmosphere for the audience.

I felt that, after the swift pace of Act 1, the second act dragged a little, though whether this was due to Christie's writing or a lack of pace from the company I cannot say. At 2 hours and 45 minutes this was a long show. There was also quite a lot of prompting and one or two muffed lines - a hobbyhorse of mine, I confess, but first night, unless companies are willing to charge accordingly, is not a dress rehearsal.

The set was excellent. As I have said before, BCP use a theatre where it is not possible to use what most regard as a conventional set and I am always impressed by their efforts. The set was a lovely period design, appropriately furnished and dressed. Props were also very much of the time. A great effort was made in order to ensure that costumes were totally appropriate to the period - well done!

Good lighting complemented this and I liked the way music was used intelligently to build up tension.

This is a small point but, especially in a play of this period, cigarettes will feature. The idea of using a type of e-cigarette gets round this to an extent but, to me, looked very artificial. I wonder if an audience would have noticed if stage directions (I make an assumption) had been ignored?

All that said, an enjoyable evening with Banbury Cross Players.