

Film Review – Blithe Spirit – Littleham Village Hall Saturday 6th June 2009

The last time I saw this piece by Noel Coward was in 1970, courtesy of the British Embassy Drama Group in Djakarta. Then it was a dynamic, polished and convincing performance put on by a group of amateurs in the University Theatre there. The fact that I remember it so clearly is a token of their performance's quality and appeal.

Not so, Saturday night's showing of the David Lean film of "Blithe Spirit" which was wooden, unconvincing and frankly very badly done by a director who became such a widely respected master of his Art. In contrast to his immense stages and wide vista's for which his later work became synonymous; films such as *Ryan's Daughter*, *Doctor Zhivago* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, this was a tightly packed claustrophobic drawing room drama which seemed to be an attempt to replicate a theatre stage representation of the play on film. There was no great advantage taken of the benefits of film as a dramatic medium in its own right. Even allowing for the massive advances in technology in the almost 65 years that have elapsed since this film was made (1945), it is difficult to appreciate why it was lauded at the time for its "special effects".

The plot concerns a light hearted experimentation with the occult through the invitation by middle class folks in a big house to a local medium who holds an after dinner séance. As a result the ghost of the former wife of the leading man is conjured up and proceeds to play mischief with his current marriage. This becomes seriously problematic so the services of the medium are again sought to try and put things right. In the process the current wife dies in a motor accident and as a ghost, proceeds to aggravate the haunting of her husband by joining forces with the ghost of the former wife. The medium goes to significant effort to try and rectify the situation but only succeeds in bringing about the eventual demise of the husband who apparently ends up eternally wed to his two former spouses.

The "ghosts" were frankly pathetic, appearing as they did, highly made up in a pale shade of Eau de Nile. The male lead played by the magnificent Rex Harrison certainly reflected the contemporary view of the husband as lord and master but he never really came over as having any emotional connection with either his past or current wives. He was characterised by Coward in the romantic interpretation of the time as a successful author living in a country mansion complete with servants. A mansion, which, whenever it was seen on the screen from the outside, was accompanied by the most awful sickly music supposedly meant to convey a sense of domestic bliss. It reminded me of the signature tune of "Housewives Choice" a popular breakfast programme heard on the wireless of the day. Nevertheless, one of the supporting actors Jacqueline Clark, herself portraying a servant, Edith, did manage to bring a unique sense of humour to her role and gathered as many laughs as did the inimitable Margaret Rutherford.

Margaret Rutherford's Madame Arcati, the medium, stole the show and in my opinion the style of her portrayal of the overexcited, bumbling, unattached female of a certain age, swathed in tweed and shod in brogues, became the pattern for her famous portrayal of Agatha Christie's "Miss Marple" in subsequent films later in her life. She owned the role of Arcati completely, her character being bigger in theatrical and dramatic proportion even than Rutherford's own generous physique. But even the light and amusing interludes that she brought to the performance failed to make this sow's ear into a silk purse.

All of the actors spoke at an enormous pace, a style that I had previously noted when reviewing another Noel Coward film, "Brief Encounter". It took some time to get used to this and to begin to understand what was being said. Although Rex Harrison's diction, a hallmark of all his performances was perfect and this made it easier when listening to him. Also Jacqueline Clark as Edith, because she portrayed a slow witted girl was also always understood on the brief occasions when she spoke. But the rest of them including Margaret Rutherford spoke at a pace that made me dizzy.

Coward was not at all happy with the way in which Lean handled this film of Blithe Spirit . He later asked Lean, "How the hell did you **** up the best thing I ever did?"

I know exactly what he meant.

Sir Lorn Stakes
Littleham June 2009