

Tiverton Dramatic Society
THE CHALK GARDEN
Director: Graham Sessions
As seen by: Joyce Pomeroy on 20th October 2017
The New Hall Tiverton

An attractive set depicted a sitting room of rural gentility with french windows leading out to the garden from where the child could be heard screaming as she danced around yet another fire. Doors led to other parts of the house and an archway to the front door. The door on stage left was between an archway and a window, where did it lead ?

The play begins as Mrs St Maugham is interviewing for the post of companion to her granddaughter, a disturbed child, who is in her care. We see two unsuccessful applicants, brief appearances but important for the setting of the play, played by Mary Cross and Helen Deegan. The last to be interviewed is the enigmatic Madrigal who despite having no references is persuaded to become part of the household.

Madrigal has an encyclopedic knowledge of plants and a desperate need for them to be cared for and allowed to thrive. She forms a bond with the disturbed Laurel and the healing of that young mind begins. Beautifully played by Vickie Mogford with stillness and no emotion apart from a sudden outburst when she realises that plants are suffering because of unthinking indifference. This was a well studied and controlled performance.

Mrs St Maugham the eccentric older lady spends her days gardening but with a complete lack of understanding of what the garden needs. She cares for her granddaughter but is too selfish to realise what is needed to help that deeply troubled young mind. Clare Moughton was exactly what you would expect this character to be, in both appearance and demeanor, a lovely performance

Laurel, the precocious, pyromaniac child was played very convincingly by Louise Chudley. Her movements behaviour and responses were as a child. She was dressed as a young girl with her hair in an alic band and one would have thought she was indeed sixteen, the age of the child she was portraying. Interesting to see Laurel's personality become calmer with the influence of Madrigal.

Maitland the manservant, was a Conscientious Objector and had spent five years in prison. This has given him a lack of confidence and a need for approval. He has become a friend to Laurel although he is very much in her control. Again his personality strengthens with Madrigal's support. Played by Richard Burt with a good understanding of the character.

Olivia, Laurel's long time absent mother, arrives to take her daughter away. There are undercurrents of her own unhappy childhood and there is still a difficult relationship with her own mother. With Madrigal's influence this rift is somewhat eased. Nicely played by Alison Harris, giving a more worldly contrast in this rural setting.

The elderly Judge arrives for lunch. Madrigal recognises him as the judge who had sentenced her to death for murder, commuted to a long prison term. He tries to stop her from revealing this secret. Skilfully played by Peter Inman, stooped and walking with a stick but dignified as one would expect with a person of great age and importance, though it was played by a much younger actor.

The Nurse who looks after the unseen elderly retainer, does not concern herself with the rest of the household except to disapprove, nicely played by Sheila Webber.

Make up was good and well considered. Such a variety of characters to be portrayed. The judge was very cleverly aged, not too much but very convincing. Laurel was "youthened" very effectively. Olivia was sophisticated, Madrigal looked to have a natural unmade face. Mrs St Maugham looked weather beaten, as you would expect from someone who spent many hours in the garden. The costumes were appropriate for the characters and setting but it might be advisable to be wary of white: stage lighting can be very revealing.

It was particularly noticeable that throughout the play the diction was superb. This is always important but especially so with a work that is relatively unknown.

This was a rare opportunity to see an excellent play that is as relevant today as when it was first staged in 1955. A compelling story showing the effect one person can have on a household.

The Chalk Garden was an excellent choice for this society. It was greatly appreciated by the audience who were totally immersed in the story. The experienced actors rose to the challenge of this great play where the behaviour of the central characters had been shaped by a complicated and disturbed past.

Joyce Pomeroy