

Review – Twelve Hours – 18 July 2019

The delightful Church of St Lawrence in Wootton St Lawrence, Basingstoke was packed to capacity last Thursday. Unusual; not for a service but for a premiere of a new drama.

There were over 100 people in the audience and the atmosphere was electric. The setting was perfect because the play, *Twelve Hours*, tells the story of Jane Austen's brief engagement to Harris-Bigg Wither whose family once owned this country estate. In fact, had she married Harris Bigg-Wither we learn that Jane Austen would have been the mistress of Manydown and may well have been married in this very church. Her would-be suitor is buried there.

Jane Austen was played by tall and elegant Kerry Fitzgerald of Purple Ostrich Productions. She was dressed in a beautifully designed Regency-style muslin dress, typical of the period, plus mop cap and shawl for her entrance. The stage was simply set with a Georgian chair and table, laid out with church candles, a white quill pen and ink pot, hairbrush and mirror. We knew from the start that Miss Austen was pleased at the age of 26 to have accepted this offer of marriage. She was described as a husband-hunting-butterfly and Kerry used her engagement ring with subtle effect throughout the performance to signify the change in her attitude towards her suitor.

The play had three scenes. The first, established who she was and why she was so thrilled about this marriage offer. It sounded like a typical Austen romance where a rich young man likely to inherit a fortune is in search of a wife. The wife-to-be in this instance is almost too old for eligibility so she jumps at the chance of a secure future. Scene one included many tales of local families, recorded in Jane Austen's letters, which had the audience in fits of laughter from time to time. In scene two she wakes at midnight and prepares the audience with her long list of doubts. In the final scene there is resolution and we learn to accept that her books will be her children, she will not accept a marriage of convenience with its expectations of heirs and spares.

It's a cleverly constructed piece of drama. In the prologue, author Phil Howe explains how he developed the idea from a combination of insight he has gained into Jane Austen's life through the guided tours which he operates with his company, Hidden Britain Tours. He candidly admits that no man should normally know as much about Jane Austen's real life, let alone create a play that tries to penetrate her thoughts. However, judging from the audience's overwhelming applause he has succeeded.

BAOS performer Ian May-Miller summarised the event as, " ... a superbly conceived and written play by Phil imagining Jane Austen's thoughts and inner debates during the 12 hours that she was engaged. Kerry Fitzgerald's delivery was convincing and entertaining as, for us in the audience, she became Jane Austen from the moment she stepped on the stage. A packed church at Wootton St Lawrence was lucky to have witnessed a real treat."

You can read more background information on this play and find out about future performances at www.twelvehours.co.uk



Kerry Fitzgerald performing as Jane Austen in *Twelve Hours* at Wootton St Lawrence Church



Kerry Fitzgerald discussing stage directions with Phil Howe at the dress rehearsal of *Twelve Hours*, performed at Wootton St Lawrence church

(BAOS – Basingstoke Amateur Dramatic Society)