INVISIBLE FRIENDS

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Having some fun with the special effects

Richmond Drama Awards

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"YOU can do anything if you put your mind to it", says Zara, the eponymous friend in **Invisible Friends**, Alan Ayckbourn's fantasy comedy.

Director, Bill Compton, has certainly put mind, body and soul to it for Teddington Theatre Club's current production, for he has doubled as set designer and involved himself "hands on" as part of the crew. He had set himself a hard task, for this is not one of Ayckbourn's best plays and certainly not the easiest to stage.

'Invisible Friends' falls rather uncomfortably between being a children's comedy and a psychological thriller. Add to this the author's notorious fragmented lines and you have a hard play to act. More to the cast's credit that they managed to overcome most of the difficulties to give strong, versatile and lively acting.

Faye Jamison, in the main role of Lucy Baines, was engaged with the audience and played a convincing schoolgirl with all the mannerisms of early teens. Steven Peters, as her older brother "grizzly" Gary, drew an all too recognisable caricature of the sullen and totally dis-engaged teenage boy, while Clare Terry as Joy, their garrulous and gossiping mum, simply buzzed with nervous energy. Back from behind the wheel of his lorry, the slumped couch-potato Walter, the dad, completed the family. Nick Young threw a whole range of versatility into this character, as Lucy fantasises her tattooed and be-ear-ringed dad into being variously attentive father and matinee idol romantic.

So Lucy invents herself a friend, Zara, invisible to all except Lucy's imagination. Then, when Lucy is concussed in a fall, her imagination goes into overdrive. Her real, but somewhat dysfunctional, family disappear and Zara's family move in, in the form of Felix and Chuck, played with obliquely sinister understatement by David Hannigan and Scott O'Brian. Things go well at first, and the new "family" is fun, but gradually they become more and more demanding and then downright malicious, until ... ... the nightmare implodes and we find that Felix, Chuck and Zara are medical staff who have come to treat Lucy's injury. Ruth Hutchinson played Zara with a seamless transition from sweetness to spite.

The cast had to work the audience hard to get the comedy out from under the fantasy, but when the children's humour came, the younger members had the whole audience in hoots.

Ayckbourn likes to experiment with quirky sets, and here we saw the whole of a two-storey house in section. The construction team had clearly worked hard to build everything into a colourful and pleasing whole, but it did lead to some awkward sight-lines, particularly from the inward extensions to the proscenium, which caused some masking, and the high split level, which was neck-craning from the stalls. Ayckbourn does of course enjoy the physical magic of the theatre, and the company had great fun with special effects, some well tried and some ingeniously inventive (but was it necessary to blind the audience with a travelling spot in order to achieve the disappearance of the Baines family?).

"You can do anything if you put your mind to it", and Bill Compton and the 'Invisible Friends' company have done it really well.