Show report – The Darling Buds of May

Many congratulations to Jules Jones and St Nicolas Players for their amazingly detailed and enjoyable production that transformed the wonderful writing of H E Bates into a highly entertaining stage performance. (This was not a copy of the hugely popular TV adaptation.)

Set in the 1950s, the stage space was divided in two, with part set out as the kitchen/dining area and the other featured as the adjoining farm yard. This was the residence of Pop Larkin (Rob Nichols), Ma Larkin (Jane Webb) and their five children, Mariette-aged 17yrs. (Alicia Tibbs), Montgomery-aged 15yrs. (Joseph Smith), Primrose-aged 13yrs. (Zoe Fell) and 11 year old twins Petunia (Emelia Bennett) and Zinnia (Mollie Bennett).Cast as members of the Larkin family, I thought it amazing how all these players blended into giving the appearance of being a genuine family structure. It was most heartening to hear the parents extolling the value and benefits of living in the countryside.

Their accommodation was smartly furnished and included a large refrigerator, a television and a well-stocked drinks cabinet. However, it transpires that this standard of living was not achieved through Pop Larkin’s extensive entrepreneurial skills but simply by failing to declare his income from a variety of sources such as scrap metal dealing, fruit picking and the odd car deal.

The arrival of Mr Cedric Charlton (played by Richard Slade), a young tax inspector sent to question Pop about his failure to complete and return one of the many tax forms sent to him, could have become a serious threat to the stability of the Larkins peaceful existence; however the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended by the family towards their visitor precluded this. Having been treated to a surfeit of food and an excess of alcohol, Charley, as he is now referred to by the Larkin family, appears to forget about Pop’s failure to submit tax returns and finds he is becoming infatuated with Mariette. Ma and Pop Larkin regard this budding relationship as most convenient since their unmarried daughter is believed to be pregnant, with the identity of the father being unknown. Prior to returning to the tax office, Charley is invited to spend a week with the Larkin family in order that he can learn to enjoy the benefits of living in the countryside and try his hand at strawberry picking.

Charley accepts the invitation and, needless to say, with attending gymkhanas, parties and meeting some of the interesting acquaintances of the Larkin family, such as Miss Pilchester (Emma Dobbs), The Brigadier (Jon Cooper), Sir George (Jed Laxton) and Lady Bluff-Gore (Arline Evenden), he decides to give up being a tax inspector. So ends this tale of a young man who is seduced by summertime in the English countryside and succumbs to the charms of a Mariette.

This was excellent entertainment provided by a dedicated production team supporting a well- chosen cast of players who were appropriately costumed with much attention being paid to detail. The song of the nightingales used in this production were recorded by Mr Nick Penny in Glapthorn woods, a few miles from where the author H E Bates wrote this play; the recording is being used with his kind permission.