

CAST WORK WELL WITH THIN MATERIAL

*Colin Lawrence reviews SURPRISE PACKAGE
by Duncan Greenwood and Derek Parkes
presented by Waterbeach Community Players*

Written in 1975 and set firmly in that decade SURPRISE PACKAGE features the Tinsley family visiting sunny Spain for a holiday which, naturally enough, turns out to be far from the relaxing break they had hoped for. The action takes place on the terrace of the 'Pension Maria' on the small island of Formentera. Mark Easterfield's set effectively conveyed the heat of the Mediterranean and the sameness of every Spanish holiday hotel you've ever stayed in - right down to the tacky bar complete with bottles of cheap champagne and watery beer.

The story is no more than a series of linked sketches, not that this really matters. What *does* matter is the fact that a talented team of actors had to work hard to make this creaky vehicle achieve any sort of momentum. The comedy is basic and hackneyed. The set 'comic' pieces - Dad sitting on a bag of sea urchins and later losing his trousers - Grandma shedding her false teeth in a swimming accident - the German tourist extracting sea urchin spines from Dad's backside - the barman wiping down the tables with a pair of underpants - (I think you get the picture) were all handled fairly well on the night I saw the show, but raised smiles rather than laughs.

Roy Furness (Alfred Tinsley) gave a convincing performance as a steadfast Northern dad with his hatred of all things (particularly the local food) foreign. **Sally Hawley (Nora Tinsley)** was suitably effective as his long-suffering wife and showed once again her flair for comedy even when faced with such poor dialogue. **Stephen Smith (Fritz)** was a credible German remembering to place his towel (they never change, do they?) very carefully on one of the terrace benches. **Christine Gilsenan** made an exceptionally good acting debut as biology teacher **Elsie** demonstrating good stage presence, which hopefully will be utilised in a more demanding role in the future. **Rob Hawley**, was extremely believable as the hotelier, **Juanito**, another confident performance. **Cathy Matthews (Rosita)** did what she had to do as Juanito's fiery fiancée and **Bernardine Orrock** supplied all the right chemistry for the man-hungry **Mildred**. As the 'love interest', **Simon Molloy (Ron)** and **Alice Orrock (Gloria)**, needed more attack in their delivery. **Valmai Furness's** timing was spot-on in her portrayal of **Grandma** but she too, like everybody else in the cast, was working with wafer-thin material. Oh, and in a performance that defies description (only because I blinked at the wrong moment) **Julie Petrucci** made a guest appearance at the end of the play as 'Mrs Fritz', complete with blonde wig, plaits and floral 'Sound Of Music' dress. A classic example of how to steal a scene when you're not really in it!

WCP have proved that they can excel in comedy when working with a good script (look at OUTSIDE EDGE last year). Unfortunately on this occasion we had good acting resources being wasted on a play that is clearly well past its sell-by date. Co-directors **Jim Sutherland** and **Andrew Creek** should have identified the need for more pace in their production and built up the stereotypical characters into even larger caricatures. By injecting these two necessary ingredients into the proceedings the tired plot would have effectively been overshadowed (or even better, smothered) by the more than competent performances of the actors who are to be congratulated on managing to save the day.