

*Ten Times Table* by Alan Ayckbourn

directed by John Marwick, Florence McFarlane and Will Clannachan

Butterfly Creek Theatre Troupe, Muritai School Hall, Eastbourne till November 15

Reviewed by Ewen Coleman

Although written during the 1970's when Alan Ayckbourn was at the zenith of his playwrighting career, *Ten Times Table* is a much gentler comedy than many of his plays written during the same period. And although the end of the play goes from comedy to farce it nevertheless still bears many of Ayckbourn's hallmarks, namely the astute observation of human nature and the foibles and eccentricities of everyday, ordinary people. And there could be no better place to observe all this than a committee meeting, in this instance a group of locals from a small English village called Pendon who have been brought together by Roy, a local shopkeeper, with the assistance of his wife Helen, to put on a pageant for the local community. It's never really clear why there is a need for such an occasion other than to bring the community together and celebrate a little known fact about Pendon – the Massacre of the Pendon Twelve - a group of rebellious workers who were set upon by the Earl of Dorset and his militia. Roy has brought together an eclectic group of people to help him organize the pageant and his efforts in trying to run the committee and get the event off the ground is what drives the play. It soon becomes apparent however, after watching the progress of the meetings, that cohesion and harmony are not going to be the order of the day as the right and left elements of the committee decide to take the original conflict for real and use it for their own ends. The leader of the left is Marxist schoolteacher Eric and his new-found female companion Sophie along with his mousey, insignificant wife Phillipa. The leader of the right is Helen who is on her own for the most part till Councillor Evans, a stickler for formality, and Lawrence, an alcoholic business man whose marriage is on the rocks comes onto Helen's side, along with Roy himself. They do though need extra help and Tim, Sophie's brother, an ex army man, comes to assist, but in a rather more militaristic way than expected. In amongst all this is Councillor Evans aged and deaf mother who acts as Secretary and provides musical interludes. *Ten Times Table* is a relatively static play in that the first four scenes are set around the committee table, requiring careful direction and subtle playing from the actors, who need to create lots of by-play between the characters and develop underlying tensions in order to make the dialogue visually interesting. While for the most part this was achieved with this production under the direction of John Marwick, Florence McFarlane and Will Clannachan it was still a little even at times and more involvement from the non-speaking characters, without being distracting, would have helped to give the overall scenes more colour and depth. The tensions between the two sides however was very well realised and became real and genuine. The final scene of the actual pageant is nothing but pure farce and in this production a lot more could have been done to create the required amount of mayhem and confusion. For all that however this was an entertaining production of a play that had characters with traits and lines that many in the audience could identify with.