

Gasping for subtlety

Written by [Eliot Beer](#), Sunday, 24 May 2009



Gasping, by Ben Elton

Performed by the **Dubai Drama Group** at Ductac, 22-23 May.

“You know, Ben Elton used to be funny.” It’s a **commonly-heard** sentiment in British media circles used to dismiss the once semi-legendary stand-up comic, and now the man who turned the life of glam-rockers Queen into a West End musical.

Funny or unfunny, anti-establishment firebrand or creative over-achiever, one thing Elton has never been is subtle – and in *Gasping*, his swipe at all things capitalist, it shows.

First staged in 1990 with Hugh Laurie trading the boards (and apparently “updated” in 2000), *Gasping*’s premise is simple: an up-and-coming exec at a big bad company looking for a new way to turn a profit comes up with the bright idea of selling filtered “designer” air – take all the oxygen out of regular air, and pump it out somewhere else – for those willing to pay, of course.

Naturally, problems crop up quite quickly; the Japanese and American competition hots up, and, worse, people start hoarding oxygen – meaning there’s not enough in the air for everyone else. By the end, the big bad corporation is building ever bigger “suck and blows”, sucking the oxygen out of the wind at the coast before it reaches potential customers, and defoliating those pesky oxygenating forests. Natch.

The Dubai Drama Group’s production of *Gasping* at Ductac played enthusiastically on the themes of corporate abdication of responsibility running through the play as George Stothard’s Phillip, the man behind “designer air”, makes the journey from enthusiastic corporate go-getter to a doubt-ridden, self-hating figure.

Throughout the play, as Phillip’s conscience gnaws away at him, he is clearly the only person in the room troubled by any moral foibles. His boss, Sir Chiffley Lockhard, played by Eric Dury, is seemingly devoid of the slightest shred of moral angst; his colleague Sandy, played by Hussain Hadi, sees only as far as the next deal, and the next promotion; and the ad girl, Kirsten, played by Susan Probert, is only interested in winning a marketing award (hmm...) – and in getting into Sandy’s pants.

Deliberately or otherwise, director Syl Rice achieved a nicely understated portrayal of corporate greed – no megalomaniacal fist-shaking and cackling laughter here. As the play progresses, the most

disturbing thing is the feeling that all these people are just doing their jobs, not plotting for world domination.

For this reviewer, it was this aspect that chimed so readily at the moment; as the world economy struggles to get back on its feet, we're increasingly realising that it was brought low not by some grand scheme, but by people "just doing their jobs". Not so much "I was only obeying orders" as "it seemed a good idea at the time...".

The cast chimed well together, with Hadi's Sandy and Probert's Kirsten giving their all to their roles as corporate yes-man and tough-but-vacuous marketing bitch respectively. But the real stars of the show were Stothard as Faustian Phillip, and Dury as his Mephistopheles, the Chief.

Stothard's energetic, nervous, wise-cracking performance plays well off Dury's more laconic, dispassionate take on the chief executive role. Only at the end is Sir Chiffley's total lack of morality truly apparent – and as we and Phillip, the only real human being in this play, realise this, the end becomes inevitable.

Saturday's second and final staging of the play was well-received by the almost-capacity audience (although, guys, theatre etiquette – applause comes at the interval and the end, not at every damn scene).

Speaking of scenes, Gaspig has a lot, and sadly the pacing of the play suffered thanks to long and complex scene-changes apparently involving almost half the contents of Ikea, but which were dealt with competently by the crew. But really, no play should have set changes almost as long as the scene before it – especially not a fast-paced comedy.

Despite these niggles, this amateur production of Gaspig was impressive – and, most importantly, enjoyable. Personally, this reviewer would have been interested to see it on a longer run, with more time for the actors to settle into their parts.

Perhaps the only major criticism we would have, more of the play than the production, is that by the end one feels rather bludgeoned by Elton's utterly cynical take on capitalism, including our happy world of marketing.

However, there's more than a grain of truth in said unsubtle bludgeoning – sadly, however, we're not sure it will be unsubtle enough for some Dubai audiences.