

## A PARSON'S TALE

Smiths Restaurant, 28 October 2015

Review by Andrew Nevill

It's 1895. Rev Smith of St Peter's, Mulworth is at Norton Parish Hall to officiate at the celebration of the rebuilding of St Peter's bell tower. Unfortunately, the expected special guests are being very tardy and Rev Smith attempts to fill in until they arrive – if they ever do.

That's the premise behind A Parsons Tale, the latest show to be featured in Smiths' Bite Size Theatre. Things started even before the show proper got underway; the audience entering the performance space to find a portable harmonium and wooden side table - with Smiths own wooden chairs arrayed before them. And on the door, welcoming the parishioners, Mrs Fletcher, in a fabulous Victorian gown. It felt like you were actually stepping into a Victorian era parish hall.

Bob Young as Reverend Smith was every inch the Victorian country vicar with his silver hair and beard, dressed all in black complete with waistcoat and pocket watch. If every priest possessed his warm tones and varied delivery the Church of England wouldn't have its current dwindling attendance problem.

In a one-man show that one man needs to get and keep the audience's attention and Young certainly did that. He was helped by Christopher Owen's clever and witty script, which launches into an array of stories, anecdotes, songs and poems, as the good Reverend desperately tries to entertain his audience in lieu of the absent luminaries. Particular highlights for me were the hilarious recitation from Charlotte Bronte and William Coombe's lovely poem about a curate. There was also some audience participation, the look on one person's face as she was asked 'Can you play harmonium?' was priceless.

Mostly gently humorous but with a few laugh out loud moments (that recitation) the piece also touched on some of the serious issues of the day - child labour, the debate over Darwin and the wholesale migration from country to town – adding some not unwelcome food for thought

I later heard another audience member call Young's performance a tour-de-force and I'd have to agree – if only for remembering all the script! But throw in all the varied things he had to - act, perform readings, play the harmonium (in deliberately amateur fashion) and sing - then that plaudit is definitely earned. But I must not end without a word for the lovely Brenda Walker, whose Mrs Fletcher was a delightful cameo that added to a fine piece of entertainment .

