

Show: Betty Blue Eyes

Society: Witham Amateur Operatic Society

Venue: Witham Public Hall. Collingwood Road, Witham CM8 2DY

Credits: Based on the film 'A Private Function', story by Alan Bennett. Music & Lyrics by Stiles & Drewe. Book by Ron Cowan & Daniel Lipman

Type: Sardines

Author: Michael Gray

Performance Date: 25/04/2022

Betty Blue Eyes

Photo: Richard McNeill

As we dust off the bunting and the union flags for the upcoming Platinum Jubilee, this charmingly nostalgic show takes us back to the post-war Royal Wedding of 1947. Austerity reigned, and rationing was still a part of everyone's life. And thereby hangs a [curly] tale ...

If you don't know Betty, she's named after Princess Elizabeth, soon to be our Queen. A sow raised in secret to be the unlawful dish of the day at Shephardsford's patriotic banquet.

Alan Bennett's screenplay [A Private Function] provides basis of the plot, in which kindly chiropodist Gilbert Chilvers, engagingly played and impressively sung by Matt Bacon, is encouraged by his social climbing wife to rise to the top of the local beau monde. Aimee Hart channels Lady Macbeth ["... do all that may become a man ..."] and excels vocally in her big numbers.

An excellent pairing at the heart of the show. But much of the fun is to be found in the large supporting cast. Almost everyone gets a character role. Maeve Borges gives us a deliciously flighty Mrs Metcalf, wife to one of several butchers. Fiona Bocking is the brilliantly batty mother-in-law. And there's a strong trio of worthies from Stewart Adkins, David Slater and Dannii Carr, great in the pub and the gents, and joined by farmer Ben Rolph for a splendid rendition of A Private Function. Slater's pig-fancier Allardyce pairs perfectly with Chilvers in a vaudeville duet for the title number.

As the real pantomime villain of the piece, Ian Gilbert doesn't quite manage the "deep manly baritone", but brings a touch of Weill and Weimar to Meat Inspector Wormold, manically wielding his green paintbrush and popping his consonants.

Let's not forget the pig herself – cute and lovable despite her gastric distress. The third time I think that I've seen this Betty, handled on this occasion by Alison Mason. Lovely to combine her final bow with a snatch of song, too.

It's a long show, with perhaps not quite enough plot development or musical invention to sustain the three hours. But a huge credit to director/ choreographer Claire Carr and her team that the momentum rarely flagged. Evocative costumes – sensible coats, party frocks and all those hats – and so many spectacular numbers – fans, spangles and a mirror-ball for Nobody, cleverly overlaid on the dining table for the reprise, and a brilliant Confessions sequence near the end.

Musically, the period pastiches work best, Susannah Edom's plucky pit band on fine form in Ill Wind and the superb Lionheart scene.