

North Essex Theatre Guild

Showcase Festival 2012-13

Witham Amateur Operatic Society

Kiss Me Kate

Saturday 3rd November 2012

Adjudicator: Will Hooper accompanied by Andrew Hodgson. Another adjudicator, Dawn King, also attended.

Introduction

Cole Porter is, it barely needs saying, one of the absolutely titans of popular music and musical theatre. His place among the small pantheon of great American song-writing pioneers is secure. Kiss Me Kate was written towards the end of his career, when he was already suffering greatly from his riding injuries. However, you'd never have guessed it from the colour, vivacity and fun which he exudes in the songs of this perennial favourite.

From a production perspective, it provides a number of fun roles, with acting, singing and dancing to the fore, and strong characterisations. It also demands a light directorial touch: confident, pacy and punchy throughout.

Witham Amateur Operatic Society has really hit a rich seam lately, with some good quality, highly entertaining productions, and imaginative show choices, over the course of the last two or three years. With this in mind, my fellow adjudicators and I were looking forward to this production with much anticipation.

Front-of-House

The Witham Public Hall is a great venue to have: easy to access, and with good facilities. I'm delighted that you are, yourselves, looking to make an enterprise out of the hall and wish you the very best of luck – it deserves to be successful.

Front-of-house was extremely efficient and friendly and our seats were well-appointed, offering a good view of the stage, and very comfortable.

The programme was professional, informative and well-presented.

Note must be made of the availability of tea and coffee. It's been a noticeable absence in previous years, and the fact that it is now on sale, alongside the other refreshments, was much appreciated!

Set design, construction and properties

The set for this show was based around two tall, versatile boxes which featured at the start of the show, and elsewhere, as backstage, ie, behind the set. These were then turned round to create the two dressing rooms. A simple and ingenious way of staging the key scenes and minimising disruption. I did feel sometimes that, when in dressing-room mode, this created a slightly

cramped feel to the acting space. However, on the whole, it worked well and assisted the smooth scene changes that were required. Other than that, backcloths were used for other scenes. I do feel that these can often look a little tired, or pantomimic, and convey the impression that they've seen several hundred similar productions. Nevertheless, they served their purpose and did not distract from the action going on in front.

The set for 'Shrew', with its balcony and fountain, was very nicely presented indeed.

Full marks for the detail that went into the set dressing, which was very cleverly done. I particularly liked the contrast in props of the two dressing rooms – to the extent of having the poster peeling of the wall in Fred's - which really conveyed the differing characters of Fred and Lilli. Elsewhere, props added ably to the backstage life and the on-stage Shakespeare. Well done.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting worked very well in this production. There was a nice contrast between the brightness and warmth of the Shrew scenes, compared to the darker lack of glamour backstage. As such, lighting didn't intrude more than necessary on proceedings but helped create the right atmosphere for the show.

Costumes and Make-up

What a challenge! Certainly, all big shows have their costumes, but in this instance you have to multiply the number by two! My colleagues and I were very impressed by the range, colour and effectiveness of all the costumes. A lot of thought had gone into portraying the characters, from the appearance of the backstage crew looking nicely in period, and the dancers, through to the contrast between Fred and Lilli, and the gangsters in their standard pin-stripped suits. Not only this, but, naturally, an actress like Lilli would have changes of costume herself, always looking glamorous, down to an elegant dressing gown!

Other characters were nicely attired and looked both in character and in period, with the tiny caveat that I'm not entirely convinced that 'Harry' would have been a member of the MCC!! Shakespearean costumes were highly traditional and extremely colourful – worn with confidence, including the headwear. Really looked the part.

Congratulations to all involved in this mammoth undertaking.

Music and Choreography

With any proper musical, it's the music which drives the show, from beginning to end. So, while the drama and dialogue may be directed elsewhere, the pace is set by a fizzing score, performed with gusto. Too often, there have been productions which have felt flat, precisely because they lacked the Broadway pizzazz created by a pacy and dynamic musical backing. Happily, Susannah and her orchestra really did the show proud, with a strong and confident performance. It set the tone for all that followed and left us feeling that we were in safe hands. This is particularly the case with such a well-known score, and such a range of big routines. Well done all round.

The chorus singing in this show was stronger than virtually any similar show I can think of. It was strong and confident, with the harmonies coming through clearly. Very good effort.

Choreography was, for this show, quite a challenge. It was also a real, stand-out success! From the bustle of the opening, through set-piece numbers like Tom, Dick and Harry, to Too Dam Hot, there were some real highlights, and performances of an excellent quality. The dancing generally was filled with energy and a great work ethic. Perhaps because of all the work that went in to these main numbers, there was a feeling that some of the later songs, notably Brush Up Your Shakespeare, were left to fend for themselves. But this is to be picky. The best routines in this

show really made us sit on the edge of our seats and delight in the energy, talent and skill on display. Very well done indeed.

Production

As I've said at the start, WAOS has done some highly-enjoyable productions of late. I'm happy to say that this one certainly fell into that category. So much effort had clearly gone into this show, and the singing and dancing was, in many cases, exemplary. The production as a whole moved along at a good pace, and there was a clear effort to tell the story, paint the characters effectively, and present some very interesting and appealing stage pictures.

The acting was confident, and demonstrated the amount of good rehearsal that had gone into it.

There was a sense that the second act slightly out-stayed its welcome – being a tad too long. This could have been shorted by perhaps cutting out some of the reprises of songs, or by removing a few lines here or there. Such was the snappiness of the performances, we were carried through, but a slightly shorter second half is, perhaps, the only real quibble I could have about this production, which impressed both me and my fellow adjudicators very much indeed.

The Acting

This is a great all-singing, all-dancing show which presents opportunities for most of the cast to develop two different characters for the price of one. This production was notable for the quality of the ensemble playing, and the strength of the character acting, which was highly enjoyable. The acting was confident and well-defined, with the key partnerships working well together and everyone seemingly confident in what they were doing.

Fred / Petruchio – David Slater

David is a seasoned, versatile and confident performer and this came through in his enjoyable performance. His characterisations of both Fred and Petruchio were both strong, showing his acting and singing skills to good effect. His movement throughout was confident and clear – we appreciated his use of the proscenium arch - and we really got to hear the resonance of his voice. Most importantly, however sharp and brusque he may have been at times, the audience were in no doubt as to how true his feelings were for Lilli. This was an enjoyable performance. Well done.

Lilli Vanessi / Katherine – Julie Codling

Julie gave strong definition to both her roles. Her first entrance as Lilli gave us a clear indication of the character – well-presented directorially. Her facial expressions, movement around the set and reactions to those around her were very good throughout and clearly defined. I did find myself wanting her to let go a little more, to be angrier, to shout and, occasionally, be more violent – especially as Kate. This was reflected in the singing, which, at times, was beautiful when it needed to be slightly sharper and more aggressive. That said, her rendition of 'I hate men' was boldly done – nicely reflecting the character, and it was a pleasure to hear her lovely singing voice. Another enjoyable performance.

Bill Calhoun / Lucentio – Ollie Barrett

Ollie gave a confident performance in both of his roles – his confident physicality helped no doubt by his evident dancing ability – something that was used to good effect in this production, notably in Tom, Dick and Harry. As was the case with many of the cast, his character in the Shakespeare seemed more confidently defined – and well-spoken - than was the case with the part of Bill, where the nuances of the part could occasionally have been developed a little more; but this is to quibble. Ollie related well with Robyn, he sang and danced well and provided another enjoyable performance.

Lois Lane / Bianca – Robyn Gowers

Robyn conveyed a strong personality on stage, both as Lois and as Bianca, and sung and moved well, relating sympathetically with those around her on stage. She really put everything into her numbers, notably in Tom, Dick and Harry – as mentioned, a real highlight. In 'Always true to you in my fashion', a number which can become a bit monotonous if you're not careful, she developed a nice variety between the verses and made a real number out of it. A strong, confident voice both in singing and acting - yet another highly competent and enjoyable performance.

Paul – Ben Huish

As mentioned earlier, this was a production which really stood out when it came to some of the group numbers and dance routines. Ben played a major role in this with his energy and hard work – something commented on by my fellow adjudicator as well. His lead in Too Darn Hot was extremely eye-catching, both in terms of his singing, which was great, and his movement and vivacity. Really good work.

Hattie – Liz Watson

Hattie is, in many ways, a tricky little part to play – not a great deal to grab hold of in terms of personality and character (certainly when compared with a parallel role like that of 'Birdie' in the film 'All About Eve'). Nevertheless, Liz dealt with demands of the part well – taking on the daunting challenge of leading the way with "Another Op'ning" - not easy, particularly given the slow build-up of the song. Liz also played a key part in the ensemble work, contributing well to collective work of the cast, most notably in the second half chorus numbers.

Harry / Baptista – Nick Clough

This was a confident performance from Nick – with clearly defined characters in both roles. As with some of the others, I felt his role in Taming of the Shrew was the stronger of the two parts, with his 'Baptista' particularly effective: he held the stage well and moved confidently when required. As mentioned under 'costumes' however, I really wasn't sure about the MCC braces!

Gangster 1 / Gangster 2 – Michael Mundell-Poole / George Jordan

Great fun parts these, with plenty to get your teeth into, and an oh-so-familiar comedy song as well. Michael and George evidently thought so too, and seemed to enjoy their scenes. They worked well as a double act, with nice accents and well-worked moves. In both cases, both my colleagues and I felt that the characters could have been built up even more, with a tad more confidence and, in some instances, menace. They sang Brush Up Your Shakespeare well, but, in line with my earlier comments about the latter stages of the production, there was a slight sense that this was a number which had not been worked on as much as some of the others.

Ralph, the Stage Manager – Tom Whelan

Tom played this part well. He demonstrated the frustrations of the stage manager very effectively, so that we really got the sense of him slowly losing the plot. Tom also formed an effective part of the ensemble with good movement and singing.

Hortensio – Joe Gray

A good and engaging performance from Joe. Joe was another able to demonstrate excellent and confident movement as well as singing. As mentioned above, Tom, Dick and Harry was one of the highlights of the show and full marks to Joe for his part in this great number.

Gremio – Mark Ellis

As with Joe, so with Mark. Another impressive performance, with strong singing and excellent movement – really brought the part to life.

Gen. Harrison Howell – David Ehren

Another nice part this, and performed ably by David. As I've said previously, Act Two was a little too long, and may be the General's number could have been cut. However, this wasn't David's fault, and he presented the character effectively, adding greatly to the later scenes.

Pops, the Doorman – Ron Howe

Another confident showing in a production filled with notable performances. Ron played the role effectively, contributing to the opening scene and the later ensemble numbers.

Wardrobe Lady – Rosie Clarke

Another nicely-played part – Rosie danced and sang well and made a confident contribution to the ensemble playing.

Conclusion

As I hope I've conveyed, this was a really enjoyable production, and we were suitably impressed by many aspects to the show.

Thank you all for your very- evident hard work and effort put into this production, both on and off stage. It was very much appreciated. I look forward to coming back very soon.

With best wishes

Will Hooper (adjudicator)
North Essex Theatre Guild