

NETG Adjudication

GUYS & DOLLS

North Essex Theatre Guild - Showcase Festival 2011-12

Group: Witham Amateur Operatic Society

Venue: Witham Public Hall

Date of Adj.: 25th April 2012

Production: Guys and Dolls

Director: Jacqui Tear

Adjudicated by: Andrew Hodgson

Accompanied by: William Hooper

Introduction

"Guys and Dolls" is acknowledged as one of the greatest of the post war Broadway Musicals. Now sixty years old, Runyon's memorable characters and Loesser's melodic score endure and combine to present a show that is colourful, brash and exuberant. No wonder it remains a very popular show with amateur and professional companies alike.

Front of House / Publicity

It was good to see a bustling and well-supported house at the performance we attended. We received our usual warm and efficient welcome and were given excellent seats. Some effort had been made to add a note of "Broadway" atmosphere with authentic signage such as "candy" for sweets, and it might have been nice to develop this further by dressing the F.O.H. team as "Guys" and "Dolls"! There was an entertaining raffle, delicious ice-creams and the usual array of drinks for sale in the bar but it would be super if there was coffee available too, perhaps the new management team could think about this? The programme was excellent, glossy and informative.

Setting and Properties:

The settings were the usual hired-in combination of folding flattage and backcloths. These were generally very literal, dully painted and unfortunately lacking in atmosphere. They also seemed to use up a lot of valuable space. Scene changes were efficiently conducted although occasionally some backstage noise was evident. We wondered if the group might be able to consider creating its own simpler settings, specially conceived for the Witham stage and the director's overall vision of the production? Props were very good indeed, in-keeping with the period and the story.

Lighting Design and Operation

The lighting and sound effects DID add a great deal to the atmosphere of the show, and the designs for both were very good. General cover was fine and spots were used where appropriate. There were some nice effects and lighting "backdrops" in various scenes such as the Havana and the Hat Box. Cues were smoothly and efficiently executed. Sound effects

were well-chosen; bustling street noise, dripping sewers, aeroplane engines etc. Again, cues were very smooth. Amplification (a real bug-bear of mine) was excellent! Pitched just right, never obtrusive, it supported the singers and musicians naturally, as it should do! Well done!

Costumes

The early 1950's period was very well captured in the costuming of the show. Well done! A colourful array of costumes (particularly for the ladies) was presented. Splashes of vivid colour for the "Dolls" contrasted well with the (mainly) black and white suits etc of the "Guys". Adelaide's outfits were all spot-on for her character, with some great hats in evidence! Her Wedding ensemble was a real eye-filler! "The Hat Box" girls all looked just right, "on stage" and off! The Salvation army uniforms provided a telling contrast and looked as though they might have been made specially? The "Guys" wore an array of trilby/Fedora hats, suits, ties etc with a good attention to detail shown. Sky looked very handsome in both his suits and short haircut. Elsewhere some of the men's hairstyling did not really pass period muster and some of the ladies wigs were worn with varying degrees of success. The drunk's beard was magnificent! Make-up was generally fine.

Music and Choreography

Geoff Osborne and his band did a great job with their musical accompaniment, producing a smooth and authentic sound. The pace throughout was steady and the balance in sound between the band and the singers was good. The quality of singing was generally very high, with some impressive solos and some lovely harmonies, particularly from the "Guys". "Luck Be a Lady" and "Sit Down" were definitely vocal highlights. Everyone looked and sounded very confident when singing.

The choreography seemed to have been tailored to the abilities of the cast and we particularly enjoyed the "Hat Box" girls' routines. There were times when the size of the stage, and the space available, seemed to suppress ambition and the opening sequence for example, which began with a terrific tableaux unfortunately looked too crowded and muddled in its overall effect, once the action started.

Principal Cast

Nicely-Nicely Johnson: Stewart Adkins gave a highly watchable, larger than life performance, despite some rather obvious body padding. Stewart's "New Yoik" accent was spot on and his sure comic touch ensured that his character always stood out (sorry!) His powerhouse performance of "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat", showed off his formidable singing voice splendidly, and was a highlight of the show.

He was very well supported by Tim Clarke as Benny Southstreet and Tom Whelan as Rusty Charlie. They were nicely contrasted in looks and character. Their opening trio "Fugue for Tinhorns" was impressively harmonised and got the show off to a very strong start. Tim's telephone voice as Joey Southstreet was very funny indeed!

Sarah Brown: I was very taken by Corinna Wilson's performance in "Anything Goes" last year and I was even more impressed with this performance. We all liked Corinna's more spirited approach to this character, with her comedic gifts showcased at various moments in the show, particularly in the challenging "drunk" scene which was very ably done. However,

what really grabbed us (and those sitting around us) was Corrina's wonderful soprano singing voice that was so effortless and clear! What a joy to hear a young actress who can sing like this in an era when most young girls want to sound like Beyonce! Very well done!

Arvide Abernathy: It was good to see Nicholas Clough playing something a bit different. He was very natural and believable in this role and played his key scene with Sarah very touchingly. Nick's solo "More I Cannot Give you" was beautifully done. A dignified and enjoyable performance.

Nathan Detroit: Michael Mundell-Poole seized this gift of a part with relish. His gravelly Bronx accent worked well and he provided many humorous moments, catching the comic essence of his character nicely. His duet with Adelaide, "Sue Me" was touching and believable, it was a good stage partnership. Michael seemed a trifle hesitant on his lines at times and there was a tendency to repeat the same hand gestures, but overall this performance was a real crowd-pleaser.

Miss Adelaide: Deborah Anderson gave an outstanding portrayal as this lovable character. She inhabited Adelaide from head to toe, looking and sounding just right. Her comic touch was sure but Deborah also showed us the vulnerability of Adelaide. Her songs were notable for the clarity of the lyrics, and even with a Bronx accent you could hear every word she uttered. Deborah never let the pace of her performance falter and she really captured the audience's heart. Very well done!

Sky Masterson: Gareth Gwyn Jones showed his versatility in a role that couldn't have been a greater contrast to his recent performance as Timothy in the very English "Salad Days". As the attractive, confident, seemingly hard-bitten Sky, Gareth looked very handsome and acted with an aura of self-confidence and enjoyment opposite Sarah. Their scenes together were very enjoyable as they played with each others emotions. Their singing of "I'll Know" was splendid and Gareth sang and acted with the requisite sense of assurity throughout. His "Luck Be a Lady" was a highlight of the production. Very Well done!

General Cartwright: An important character in the scheme of things, this wasn't a large role but Janet Wash's performance was greatly enjoyed by us. She seemed just right and completely natural as this dignified figure, emanating warmth and common sense in her characterisation. Well done!

There were a variety of small supporting roles that inhabited the Broadway streets of Damon Runyon's world and stood out, including Anne Wilson's Agatha which was a delightful, comic cameo, bringing humour to the Salvation Army scenes with some lovely facial reactions. Trevor Drury was sartorially impressive as Harry the Horse, and Richard Cowen was suitably menacing in his overcoat and rosette as a chilling Big Jule. Kathryn Adkins' expressive, wise-cracking blonde Mimi looked as though she had literally walked off the New York streets circa 1950. Peter Fishwick played the rather thankless role of Lt. Brannigan with suitable authority and determination although he looked a little too modern in appearance while Jeff Babbs, with his impressive beard, was convincingly drunk throughout the show, although this was a running gag that occasionally threatened to take focus away from the main action. All the "Guys" had their moment to shine in the "Crap Game" sequence, and the "Hat Box" girls sassily supported Adelaide and each girl was nicely differentiated in looks and character.

The chorus generally looked as though they were enjoying themselves and the quality of singing was good. Everyone had a “go” at the required accent with varying degrees of success!

Production

Jacqui Tear produced a show that was entertaining and colourful. All the necessary elements to make this musical a success were in evidence. Apart from some moments when the stage seemed too crowded for the space available, blocking was good and the show moved quite smoothly from scene to scene. We felt that, overall, the pace of the production was rather stately when more attack and Broadway razzle-dazzle was needed. Jacqui had ensured that the characterisations of the four principal roles were good and there was some nice detail in their performances. Most importantly, the production engendered a genuine feeling of enjoyment and commitment from its cast and, as a result, the show was very well received by the audience at the performance we attended.

Best Wishes, Andrew Hodgson (Adjudicator)