

MICHAEL GRAY'S ARTS BLOG

FOLLIES

My first taste of Follies was in Portobello, thirty years ago. Its UK première, I believe. An American student company on the Edinburgh Fringe, working in a vast, dusty auditorium.

That kind of atmosphere helps the mood of the piece, of course, as it did at Witham, where the stucco proscenium arch and the seen-it-all back wall neatly framed Sondheim's bitter-sweet exploration of nostalgia and relationships grown old and cold.

I knew from the first number that it was going to be a rich experience. Roscoe's glorious voice welcoming those Beautiful Girls as they made their entrance down the grand staircase. Nikki Mundell-Poole's production stressed the contrast of past and present, naivety and cynicism, helped by the age difference of the principal characters and their youthful ghosts. Lighting and costume had an important role here, too, I felt.

Again and again there was a pang as we saw the chasm between now and then – Vincent and Vanessa's Strictly Ballroom moment, with very young shadows in white, Heidi's One More Kiss, a pure kitsch duet with her younger self, and even the curtain calls, where the simple turn for the four principals gave us one last remembrance of things past.

Those four central roles were all excellently cast and played. Buddy, amusing in frantic Groucho/Jolson mode for Buddy's Blues, but also very moving in the beautifully phrased Hey Margie sequence with the dummy. Sally, still and poignant for her exquisitely sung Losing My Mind, Ben, vocally very secure throughout, and nicely relaxed in his cynical character, notably in The Road You Didn't Take. And Phyllis, giving everything in Could I Leave You.

There are hit numbers for others of the Golden Girls, too, as they come together one last time to "stumble through a song or two", and Hattie made the most of her Broadway Baby, Carlotta of I'm Still Here. How lucky of Witham to have all this showbiz experience to cast ...

The young showgirls looked great, the choral singing was impressive, though I was less sure about the off-stage chorus. There were one or two places where the pace dropped a little on the first night, and the band had the odd rough edge. But MD Jill Parkin worked wonders keeping everyone together: this is a very tricky score. And there were many marvellous musical moments, like the bass clarinet for Still Here, and the production number Mirror Mirror.

The emotional impact of the piece was helped by the intimacy of the venue, and the relatively subtle amplification – the Royal Festival Hall revival did nothing for me, despite the presence of Henry Goodman.

But, like that Portobello premiere, this polished, passionate production will remain with me, as Witham left us with one last image, a lone phantom showgirl under the working lights in the deserted Weismann Theatre.