

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD
SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2013/2014
ADJUDICATION

Group	Witham Amateur Operatic Society
Venue	Witham Public Hall
Date of Adjudication	Friday 2 nd May 2014
Production	JACK THE RIPPER by Ron Pember and Denis de Marne
Director	Kerry King
Adjudicated by	Ian Amos
Co-adjudicator	Jenny Burke

Introduction

There was a good-sized audience at the Witham Public Hall, which was a pleasure to see as this is not a well-known musical and therefore to some degree a risk for groups to produce. A pleasant welcome and a few members of front-of-house in period costume. The programme was of excellent quality and quite detailed with a thorough breakdown of plot and characters. However, I did miss individual photographs of the performers.

Set

There were two main settings: The first had an impressive painted backdrop of St Paul's Cathedral, and either side of this, panelled doors that served as general entrances, front doors of the prostitutes' lodgings etc. They were at slightly different levels and, while having some character, didn't look wholly inspiring as structures. They were however functional. The other major set was the music hall. This was created by curtains rapidly flying in: The front one creating the impression of theatre velvet tabs (though they were not) to form a fixed opening for the stage of the music hall. The latter was at times a little small and the opening a little low so that a tall actor like Phil Thompson could become shadowed by the 'curtain'. The speed with which the production could move between these two sets was mighty impressive and essential for maintaining the flow of things.

I did think that some haze to create a smoggier, murkier atmosphere would have been a boon. It also enriches the lighting - but perhaps the hall doesn't allow smoke/haze.

Props

All seemed to work well. The Parasol held by Marie at the Music Hall in "Generally Nice" was to my eyes a little too modern. The umbrellas at Polly Nichols' funeral were also a little modern, though forgivable, as they did allow the chorus to form a very effective tableau with their backs to us.

I did wonder about the signage: How would this have been done in Victorian times? – Those used here seemed anachronistic; like modern marker pen on paper. Paint daubs, printing press (unlikely), chalk on board...? I don't know the answer, but an interesting conundrum.

Lighting

The lighting was integral to fuelling the muddy, murky atmosphere of the production. A touch of blue night, lots of shadow and the odd shaft of light typified the streets. In contrast, the music hall had a warmer, indoor quality. I did feel in the music hall, to far right and left some chorus members' faces were a little too obscure.

In "Ripper's going to get you", there was very good use of front footlights to throw harsh shadows onto the backcloth. The production could perhaps have been a little more aware of the shadow potential and used them more consciously. There was also a red light behind the stage left door that threw shadows of performers waiting to come on against the backcloth. It was sometimes annoying and could have been solved by actors waiting further back or another lighting solution found.

The lighting devices used were simple but effective; such as the black out and light flashes to indicate murder and the sinister lighting of the black-cloaked Ripper.

Music

The band had a good balance, all sounded natural and unforced, never drowning out the singing and achieved some suitably creepy moments (in fact I could have perhaps done with a little more creepy underscore being added to some of the scene changes). The show doesn't build to an exciting ending and the music could have been brought into play to give it a more climatic ominous ending. It was a small band but a good variety of sound was achieved. Personally I was not a great fan of the rather modern style the electric guitar was at times played in (deliberately and as written I am sure): It just didn't sit well with my ear.

The show was well sung throughout; with some rousing solos and chorus numbers. Clearly things had been rehearsed well. Occasionally the words seemed rather mushy: This could have been down to the mic-ing, the amount of reverb, the quality of the speakers etc. – especially as it mostly seemed to afflict soloists rather than chorus – or perhaps it was just enunciation that needed

sharpening. The women's trio by Lizzie, Marie and Annie of "Good-bye Day" was very good: A beautiful song. There were some good 'a capella' sequences.

Stage Management

This was a very slick and fast moving production - typified by the transition from music hall to Polly Nichols' funeral with a complete change of mood.

Costumes

The style of this production did not lend itself to many elaborate costumes. The ladies were dressed in long skirts and tunic tops, all in muted colours that suited the style of the piece and their status, with shawls, cloaks and hats to indicate change. The use of black shawls at the funeral to detract from the white blouses worked well. Marie Kelly's costume was a little more elaborate, with folds and ruffles in the material. It was the costumes for the men that had the most variety and there were a lot to find. It is not easy to dress men for this era and their costumes worked very well; from working tweeds to evening dress.

CAST

David Slater (Chairman/Magician/Sir Charles Warren/Magistrate)

This is a real tour-de-force of a role: David Slater's Chairman doubling other roles very much dominates proceedings as the MC for the music hall and the dynamic story teller. His performance was large – in a good way – and well projected: A booming clear speaking voice and a pleasant rich singing voice as well. I felt his direct address to the audience could have felt a little more 'live'; perhaps moving along the stage picking out individual people as opposed to staying plumb centre. This was a successful performance.

Emma Loring (Lizzie Stride/ Queen Victoria)

Emma has a lovely, sweet warm voice, with a folksy lilt to her singing. She played her parts with confidence - and as Queen Victoria with some humour. She really gave her character some oomph, fully entering into the style of the production. Very enjoyable.

Stewart Adkins (Montague Druitt 'Toynbee Hall')

Stewart had great fun playing this role. It is always appealing to play the saint and the (probable) sinner too! His face was packed with large facial expressions; ideal for such a melodramatic character. He also had a pleasant and rousing singing voice.

Keily Hall (Marie Kelly)

The lynch pin of the women's roles, singing a number of the key numbers. We watch her change from being rather blasé to being afraid enough to clear out of the East End as she watches her fellow prostitutes one-by-one come to a nasty end. She had lots of cockney attitude. At times her singing was almost a little too hard-nosed, too 'in character': She needed to blend in with her fellow singers more in ensemble work. I also didn't feel her fear sufficiently at being the next potential victim. This however was a good solid performance.

Emily Smith (Annie Chapman)

Emily gave us a really street-worthy, brazen, spunky performance that was bang on for the period and style of the production. She had a pleasant singing voice.

David Bowles (Police Sergeant Coles)/

Ron Howe & Matthew Waldie (Police Constables)

David's Police Sergeant was a warm-hearted man: More Victorian 'Dixon-of-Dock-Green' than 'The Sweeney'. He had a humour and a charm that made him rather a slice of light relief in a parade of mostly rather unpleasant people. He relished the "Policeman's Chorus" with Ron Howe and Matthew Waldie, going undercover as prostitutes. They had clearly been modelled on the Les Dawson School of Drag and had great fun with the song. It worked because they played it fairly straight and didn't send it up too much. Well done!

Phil Thompson (Daniel Mendoza, Leather Apron the Butcher)

Phil had a lizard-like angularity to his movements that was unusual and also rather creepy to watch. He played the role at full tilt and with a fair degree of menace. What he gained in gusto he sometimes lost in clarity of words, especially when singing – and just needed to enunciate rather more clearly. There was lots of swagger in this rather nasty pimp, but some variety to the movements might have been good as we went along.

Elisabeth Batt (Polly Anne Nichols)

Simon Rothman (Dinky Nine Eights/Mr Fogelma/Norwegian Sailor)

Tom Whelan (Blue Nose Stack/Albert, Duke of Clarence)

Richard Herring (Slop Wallace/The Demon Barber)

Hilary Watling (Miss Saucy Rosebud)

Janet Hawkes (Catherine Eddowes)

Donna Goddard (Frances Coles)

Sean Griffiths (Lord Overcoat)

It is one of the pleasures of this musical that it allows lots of opportunities for meaty characterful cameos from the lots of the chorus members – from old to young (with Sean Griffiths' cheeky Lord Overcoat). Here is all of Victorian street life – hoodlums, hang-a-bouts, prostitutes and music hall extras. I was impressed by the way the above fully entered into their roles, both acting and singing, such as in "What a life".

Chorus

Much of the chorus work is unison or simple two-part harmony: Simply done but effective. The chorus sang with power and involvement and their enthusiasm never flagged. The sound they produced seemed like it was coming from a larger group.

Production

'Jack the Ripper' is a brave choice for a group. Whilst it has name recognition of course it is almost unknown as a musical: So good that Kerry championed it.

As a musical it has an interesting structure – continually moving between the streets of London and the music hall so that real events are given the quality of a dark entertainment: The vulgarity of the music hall juxtaposed with the barbarity of events at street level. However this can also tend to make the characters rather distant. Would it be beneficial or is there a way to make some characters such as the prostitutes more sympathetic to the audience? The show also lacks a good ending – and it was in need of a little help musically or dramatically to give a real sense of climatic menace as Marie is led to her doom.

The style of the production was confident. Everything moved so smoothly. I enjoyed the bustle of the streets scenes and the handling of the chorus in general: They had a real life to them. I particularly liked the copycat movement in "Suspects".

This production of 'Jack the Ripper' gave us an enjoyable evening. It managed to create a believable world; using the works dual-setting structure fully and successfully.

Ian Amos
23rd May 2014