

# **NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2013-14**

**Group:** WITHAM AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY  
**Production:** OLIVER!  
**Adjudication Date:** FRIDAY 1ST NOVEMBER 2013  
**Venue:** WITHAM PUBLIC HALL  
**Adjudicator:** Dawn King accompanied by Andrew Hodgson

## **FRONT OF HOUSE:**

As always in Witham, we received a warm and friendly welcome from Patsy Page, the Sheppards and the front of house gentlemen. In the limited space available there was a good range of show photographs. The Olde Sweete Shoppe was groaning with goodies and manned by a suitably costumed helper. We very much appreciated our request for coffee being responded to.

The raffle was dealt with in the most efficient way - by picking the winning tickets while the show was running, and the appreciation shown to the St John's Ambulance team was well received.

The programme design was again imaginative, and, importantly in a production with so many young people, everyone was clearly photographed and named - a point which was appreciated by a number of people sitting near us. Use of watermarks needs to be handled carefully - unless the text is in bold, it can make some parts difficult to read in the diffuse lighting of a theatre auditorium.

## **SETTING & PROPS:**

The use of the London backcloth to maximise space on the stage worked well for most scenes, and the various pieces brought on to signify scene changes were judiciously chosen and efficiently handled.

Whilst the Punch and Judy booth was authentic, it did dominate the stage right area, both visually and in terms of space occupied and was not really utilised as part of the crowd activity. I personally found use of the bridge for the bedroom scene too contrived, but it did make for good visuals later in the ensemble piece. Props were excellent and in period for the production. Difficult props like the milkmaid's yoke were extremely well handled by cast members.

## **COSTUMES:**

The workhouse children and Fagin's gang were appropriately dressed, whilst costumes for chorus were generally bright and colourful, and appropriate to the period. The adults were perhaps a bit too 'clean and tidy' for the working class folk they were supposed to be representing Mr & Mrs Sowerby's black was very accurate, and Mr Brownlow looked absolute "quality" in the beige overcoat. Footwear was generally appropriate. Hairstyling was mixed - some of the wigs were too obvious and 'styled'. We both felt that something more natural would be more appropriate in contemporary productions

## **LIGHTING**

The opening number, in its shades of purple and blue was really stunning, and the lighting generally enhanced all ensemble scenes well.

## **SOUND**

Timing, sound levels and balance for all general sound and for effects was good. The amplification is generally always good at W AOS and this production was no exception. It was sympathetic to performers and created a 'natural' sound.

## **MUSICAL DIRECTION/ORCHESTRA:**

Geoff Osborne achieved a noteworthy partnership between the orchestra and on-stage performers, with the former supporting and complementing the singers where needed, but never dominating. This was most evident in numbers such as "*Reviewing the Situation*" and "*As Long as He Needs Me*".

Diction was generally good, and the chorus harmonies were maintained well throughout the numbers, even those with plenty of movement. The children were particularly well drilled, (both workhouse and Fagin's Gang), and this can only reflect significant investment of time and commitment, particularly given the apparent age range.

## **PERFORMANCES:**

### **Workhouse Children/Paupers**

The workhouse children and paupers created a lively engaging opening number. With vocals and choreography clearly well-rehearsed, they entered into the spirit of the piece with enthusiasm. There was good vocal volume and the harmony singing was well done. There had been a bit too much enthusiasm with the make up in our view - whilst some realistically reflected the general grubbiness and bruising required, others had great streaks of black across their faces which looked artificial, in our view.

### **Fagin's Gang**

Slick movement and strong vocals made Fagin's gang a joy to watch. Each member of the gang seemed to have worked hard to develop individual character and mannerisms, and they clearly worked well together as a team. Accents were appropriate, and well maintained.

### **Chorus/Dancers**

Excellent chorus work, and the 'big' numbers were very well performed, with lots of energy and style, despite the limitations of space. We particularly liked "*Consider Yourself*". The vocal dynamics and diction were excellent, with good balance between parts, and where solo lines were required these were well sung - notably by the three ladies in the "Who will buy number". Members of the cast worked well with the set to create visual height when possible, and the choreography was generally imaginative, active and well performed. Where the dancers were used, they gave stylish performance, and it was good to see the rest of the chorus responding well to them.

### **Oliver**

Charlie has a lovely singing voice which resonated well in "*Where is Love*" and "*Who will Buy*". He entered gamely into the various chase scenes, particularly in the opening number. It would have been good if he could have developed workhouse speech - there would have been no role models for the very polite accent he used throughout the performance.

## **Widow Corney**

Liz presented a larger than life character. She was particularly effective when showing her hard and mean side (eg when dealing with Old Sally) but the quasi-pantomimic setting of the *Hi Shall Scream* number failed to allow her to realistically portray those 'dark' and manipulative qualities of Widow Corney which are so important to the development of the overall piece.

## **Mr Bumble**

Tim is really growing as an actor, and this part gave him plenty of opportunity to develop vocal range, stature and pace of delivery. For a slender man, Tim was a very convincing fat man, his physicality only let down by the styling of the costume waistcoat! His scenes were all well done, and he marked well the change between a bold, commanding presence in the undertaker's with a quivering anxiety with Mr Brownlow.

## **Mr. Sowerberry**

Richard created the character of Mr. Sowerberry the moment he stepped onto the stage, with his stance and gestures being suitably "Uriah Heep-ish". *That's Your Funeral* and the supporting dialogue were well delivered and entertaining

## **Mrs.Sowerberry**

The business of Mrs. Sowerberry contrasted well with her husband. Deborah gave a stylish performance in this role, encapsulating the Dickensian character well. Movement and vocals were good in the number, and there was pace and energy in the dialogue. Very watchable.

## **Noah Claypole and Charlotte**

Edward caught the oafish, bullying nature of this character well, whilst Abigail was a really mean, sly Charlotte. Whilst diction could have been a little clearer on occasion from both performers, this will come with experience.

## **Artful Dodger**

Max made this character live up to its name. He had a cheeky confidence which was appealing, and combined this with excellent timing and good movement. He worked well with the other gang members, and was aware of space and the activity around him. As previously noted, the delivery of the whole of *"Consider Yourself"* was a show highlight for us, and Max worked well with Alice.

## **Bet**

This was a confident performance from Alice, using her expressive face and gesture to effectively convey both an innocence and worldliness in turn. She worked well with Nancy in both vocals and movement, particularly in *"Fine Life"* and *"Oom Pah Pah"* and made good use of the stage and furniture.

## **Fagin**

George's physical appearance was excellent, with a pleasant singing voice, and he managed to present the movement and accent of this famous character well. However, both I and my colleague felt that

he failed to generate the kind of energy that would make him a figurehead to the gang of boys. Lack of confidence in his words in both song and dialogue didn't help, and on the night we attended, this slowed the pace of "*Pick a pocket*"

### **Nancy**

Another confident performance from Robyn- and a long way from the Shani Wallis School of Nancy's! I thought that she portrayed the abusive relationship with Sykes well, so that her song was a poignant commentary. The phrasing in "*As long as he needs me*", was excellent. She was sincere and natural with the children, and there was heartache behind the smile in the more up tempo numbers

### **Bill Sykes**

Physically imposing, Patrick wore his costume well, and his use of lower register helped in creating a real sense of menace. His physicality and the handling of his props was excellent.

### **Bullseye**

A proper scene stealer, and well handled by Bill and chorus.

### **Mr Brownlow**

The kindly Mr Brownlow was generally well portrayed by Ron. The character would have benefitted from a little more light and shade - this is a man who is going through extremes of emotion, and this didn't quite come across, particularly in the dialogue about his daughter.

### **Mrs Bedwin**

Emma sang very nicely and developed a warm and caring character - it was easy to see how Oliver would have been drawn to her.

### **Dr Grimwig**

The character developed by Stewart showed good comic timing and stage presence,

### **Old Sally**

Old Sally has few lines to say, but they are critically important to the development of the plot. Unfortunately, by having her on the floor, and using breathy delivery, it was difficult to make out what was being said. More volume would have helped.

### **DIRECTION**

Nikki is to be congratulated for her inclusive approach to this production, and I think that the end result justified some of the compromises that were made in set design. A good company feel had been engendered, and the blocking of action was good in a fairly tight stage space.

As previously stated, the full ensemble numbers were first rate.

Overall we felt that the production could have been more consistently naturalistic. There are some dark themes in the show, despite the generally upbeat music, and modern audiences can respond to these. Whilst some attempt was made, to explore these themes, the overall tone was quite 'light' and it did feel that perhaps more support could have been given to some performers in the development of character.

However, this was definitely a crowd pleaser of a show, and one which we enjoyed.

Thank you.

Dawn King  
16th November 2013.