

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2017/2018

ADJUDICATION

Group	Witham Amateur Operatic Society
Venue	Witham Public Hall
Date of Adjudication	Wednesday 27 th April 2017
Production	RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET by Bob Carlton
Director	Claire Carr
Adjudicated by	Ian Amos
Co-adjudicator	Jenny Burke

INTRODUCTION

RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET is a strange beast - based loosely on 'The Tempest', the B-movie 'Forbidden Planet', with lines drawn from all over Shakespeare, Rock 'n' Roll music from the 50s and 60s and with a number of nods to the rather more adult 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show'.

It was fun to have the 'crew' wandering among the audience before the show started, welcoming us aboard 'ship'. The programme was informative and glossy.

SOUND/BAND

The band was really slick and tight with some great 'period' touches to the sound. The lead electric guitar coming out to accompany the air guitar section was a really fun moment – and well played. Occasionally the sound balance was a little out: There were times when one singer would far dominate others or I could see the chorus boop-doop-di-shoo-whapping, but I couldn't really hear them. Early on I think a little extra atmospheric music in the silences would have helped the show lift-off at a steeper trajectory. But on the whole a good job.

LIGHTS

These were impressive at times, annoying at others. With flashing and tracking lights almost continually in action they certainly added to the excitement. The negatives were a little too much use of the flashing spots straight into the audience's eyes (the 4 green LEDs at the back were the main culprits) and the opening of the airlock which used spots so blinding I couldn't look. With so much bright light activity going on at times the stage focus was not in the right place: We needed the actors acting to be lit well and our main concern. But at their best the lights certainly added to the disco frenzy of the show.

SET

The set was simple but suitably out-of-this-world. I liked all the flashing lights on control panels, the knobs and dials, and levers to pull that kept the crew busy. With metal steps to a bridge either side the set fulfilled its purpose, but it did feel that it rather limited the space for the action and led to some very crowded scenes on the main stage when everyone was in a terpsichorean tempest. Proceedings were dominated by the large projection screen that was clear and worked well. I am not sure what proportion of what was on screen was generated by the group and to what degree supplied for hire with the show, but it was a good mix of live action, animation, disaster warnings and old B movies. I suspect timing with the live action on stage was not always easy – but the synchronisation was rarely out.

Centre back of the stage there was the airlock – an impressive mix of smoke, lights, sounds and sliding doors to create a rather good illusion, but it was a pity that it was so low that people had to duck to enter/exit. Also, it was occasionally blocked by cast in front of it when in use so one couldn't see who was coming or going.

COSTUMES/HAIR/MAKE-UP

These together caught an appropriate B-movie 'cheap' quality of the sort that made early 'Doctor Who' episodes have such charm; that feeling the dressing-up box as well as the local ironmongers had been raided and spray-painted in a quest for the future: Silver plastic, shiny fabrics, hair hoisted into Telstar bobbles all added to the effect. These were all mixed with a touch of what the Kool Kats were wearing in the 50s/60s.

CHOREOGRAPHY

The stage was at times too small/overly-packed with performers giving the choreographer a difficult task, with moves at times cramped and a little tatty. With the smaller dance troupe things fared rather better, but there remained a feeling that the ensemble bounded on once or twice too many times to act as backing dancers on this or that number. The choreography was perhaps a little general in style and I felt it could have found a more individual, cosmic style to suit the show. But more positively there were some stand-out numbers such as 'Born to be Wild' that worked really well and the uniform moves of 'Monster Mash' were marvellous. The choreography certainly added to the general punch of the show.

CAST

I liked the fact that all of the main cast had their moment in the sun allowing them to show-off their vocal talents which were never less than good, and with some really top-notch performances.

DAVID EVEREST-RING (Captain Tempest)

David provided us with lots of delightful tongue-in-cheek style with his strong characterisation of Captain Tempest. Tempest very much dominates the action of the show and is the dynamo for a lot of what goes on. Musically David had a lot to do and he can really deliver a number in a full-bodied, hip-gyrating, swaggering no-holds-barred fashion. He certainly added to the fun.

DIANA EASTON (Science Officer/Gloria)

Diana has a good dramatic presence as the Science Officer, delivering her lines in a clear and decisive manner. Vocally some numbers seemed to fit Diana's voice better than others – but when we hit 'Go Now' she showed what a rich and warm, deep and soulful sound she could make.

HARRY TUNNINGLEY (Cookie)

Here was a performance that really stood out. Harry moved and danced energetically, delivered the oft-Shakespearean lines clearly, gave us some real drama when his love was spurned and he turned into the (too nice to be bad) baddie. Last but not least he has a really good singing voice, thankfully, as he had lots to sing. A few numbers seemed to stretch his range a little, with a switch in octaves, which is a pity, otherwise I am sure he would have delivered all to the same high standard that he attained in a number like 'Ain't Gonna Wash for a Week'.

EMMA LORING (Bosun Arras)

Emma was suitably efficient as the Bosun. She strutted with an air of authority around the ship. Emma has a good presence when acting with a clear projection. Her duet with Cookie 'Yeh Yeh' was well sung and performed.

RHIANNA HOWARD (Navigation Officer)

Rhianna had to dash here there and everywhere, signalling attacks from this and that and a multi-tentacled creature too! Her delivery was mostly clear though occasionally a little fuzzy when in panic-stations mode. She also delivered some effective singing.

STEWART ADKINS (Doctor Prospero)

First seen on the projection screen when he burst onto the real stage Stewart was a larger-than-life Doctor Prospero. He has a strong rich voice, both speaking and singing and interacted dramatically well with his fellow actors, giving this frothy musical a little gravitas. He showed off his vocal talents admirably in 'Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood'.

CLAIRE ROWE (Miranda)

From bobby-socked innocent to raunchy rock chick Claire had fun with Miranda. Finding herself in the midst of misdirected love-longings and the family fracas, she was the appropriately distraught ingénue. Claire really seemed to enjoy the raunchier side of Miranda, exemplified by her good rendition of 'Robot Love'.

TIM CLARKE (Ariel the Robot)

Tim was clearly enjoying himself as the roller-skating robot. Suitably machine-like at times in voice and movements. He wheeled around, slightly precariously, as the fun facilitator in the crew. Good delivery. Good singing voice – such as in his 'Who's sorry now' to Gloria.

DANCERS/ENSEMBLE

The dancers and ensemble players were an important part of the entertainment-value of the show. After a slow start, things warmed-up and the energy generated in the 1st Act was carried over nicely into the 2nd Act. The dancers enthusiastically gyrated as backing dancers behind this and that number. The ensemble fulfilled almost continual roles as the crew – checking knobs and dials and claspings clipboards. When they all came together and filled – and I mean filled – the stage and danced and sang, they turned the show into a real party!

PRODUCTION

RETURN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET is quite a melange – and for me has one element too many (the random quoting from Shakespeare annoyed and confused rather than amused me), but that means that the production needs to be really focussed on how to make these diverse elements work together! This production got many things right: There was a nice touch of B-movie style in the costumes, good renditions of classic songs to fulfil the ‘Jukebox Musical’ element of the show, and after escaping its slow start it flowed well with people bounding on and off stage in a slick manner.

What the production lacked was focus. Less is often more: Not to have the lights flashing and tracking too much, not to overfill the stage, not to have people fiddling in the background all the time, to make sure our attention was on the main action. Some of the best scenes were the simplest, be they spoken or sung.

Also, one thought kept crossing my mind – that I am sure that it was supposed to be funnier than it was. I have never seen the show before so can’t say whether the fault lay with the words or how the potentially comedic material was staged/delivered. Probably a little of both.

However, when things were right the production was a rock ‘n’ roll romp – and that is main memory of the show that I took home with me.

Ian Amos
8th May 2017