

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2019-20

Witham Amateur Operatic Society

“Sister Act” directed by Robyn Gowers (assisted by Gemma Gray)

Adjudicated by Andrew Hodgson & Liz Mullen

24/10/19

INTRODUCTION

“Sister Act” is a highly popular musical version of the classic 1991 Whoopi Goldberg comedy film. It follows the same storyline, but has a “new” 1970s musical score to reflect the period in which the show has been re-set. As a child of that era, I really enjoyed listening to all the musical references in the score. Obviously, the leading character of Deloris is usually performed professionally by a black actress, but with some tweaking of the dialogue, the ethnicity of the leading character is not an issue, bearing in mind the role was originally conceived for Bette Midler. The choice of this show surely proved to be a Box Office winner for WAOS, judging by the full house at the performance we attended.

FRONT OF HOUSE

We received the usual friendly and efficient welcome from the F.O.H. team and we were given excellent seats with a clear view of the stage! There did appear to be some confusion among the audience as to where they were sitting, as the rows and seats did not seem to be lettered/numbered. The usual range of refreshments were available and there was an amiably hosted, if rather lengthy, raffle conducted at the end of the interval. The glossily designed programme was very attractive and packed full of information about the company, the show and the production.

SETTING

Given the size of the cast, and the limited size of the stage, the basic set provided a clear space on which to stage the show. Rostra, with steps leading up to it, enhanced groupings, and the cyclorama behind it provided a canvas on which to showcase different lighting effects. Various pieces of furniture including a bed, bar, desk, tables etc were brought on by the efficient stage management team to simply suggest various locations. There was a front cloth used for street scenes, and the church backdrop (complete with altar at one point) looked suitably impressive. Black curtains were used for a lengthy corridor scene, and it would have been nice if there had been some sort of dressing to suggest that we were in a convent.

Properties were good and in-keeping with the period in which the show was set.

LIGHTING AND SOUND

The late 1970s were well conveyed throughout the show, and the lighting design did much to enhance the atmosphere of that flashy period. The use of colourful spots, and a mirror ball, helped to promote this, and there was a nice contrast between the “outside” world and the more sombre and closeted convent scenes. Follow spots were effectively used to highlight solo performances, with cues smoothly executed.

As always at this address, the sound amplification was excellent. The lyrics and dialogue had clarity and the balance between the band and the performers was very good. All the Sound effects, gun shots, bells etc were all well-done, and sounded natural and were efficiently cued.

Well done to all involved in this aspect of the production.

COSTUMES

The quality of costuming at WAOS is always high, and this production was no exception. There was very good attention to detail in the 1970s clothing, as anyone who has worn flared trousers, big collars, and luridly coloured man-made fibres could testify! The costumes were beautifully accessorised with appropriate hair styling, grooming and make-up. The religious garments all looked correct to us; for the Nuns, the Monsignor and, of course, the Pope! The increasingly “glitzy” Nun’s habits were a delight, culminating in an eye-popping finale! It was clear that a lot of hard work had gone into making sure that, visually, the production looked just right.

MUSIC

The fast pace of the show, was greatly helped by the attack, and expert playing, of Musical Director Emma Nash and her talented band, who produced a very professional sound. The sounds of the seventies were superbly recreated with clarity and beat. My foot was tapping throughout the evening! There were a lot of songs, and the standard of singing was high with the performers sympathetically supported by the musicians. There was some powerful solo work, and great harmonies from the ensemble. Very well done to you all!

DIRECTION/CHOREOGRAPHY

Robyn Gowers (who we hope is recovering well from her back surgery) and Gemma Gray produced a fast-paced and exuberant show. They worked well within a fairly limited stage area; there were times when we felt that the show needed a more expansive space. The choreography did take account of this, and the cast looked comfortable and confident with what they were asked to do, particularly the Nuns, whose routines had to be very tightly co-ordinated. Again, the 1970s era was affectionately, and accurately, presented in the dancing and choreography. The comedy in the show is quite broad, and there isn’t a lot of depth in the content, but both the direction, and the acting, touchingly brought out the growing friendship of the Nuns and Deloris, and their affection for each other; exemplified by the performance of the title number, was beautifully done. It was clear that the directors had engendered a great feeling of team-work and enjoyment amongst the cast, which, in turn, communicated itself to the audience!

PERFORMANCES

DELORIS VAN CARTIER: Corrina Wilson seized this plum part with relish, and performed with her usual high voltage verve and commitment; she never gives less than a hundred per cent to any role she plays. Deloris is the heart of the show, and Corrina gave her a big heart in her dealings with the Nuns; their developing friendship and mutual admiration was hilariously and touchingly conveyed. The songs provided

Corrina the opportunity to use all her wide-ranging vocal skills and power. A sassy, high-octane performance; fabulous baby!

MOTHER SUPERIOR: Diana Easton clearly established her character's personality and straight-forward values right from the start, and particularly in her two solo numbers which she sang with clarity and strength. Diana ably conveyed the authority and common-sense of the Mother Superior, and her exasperation with Deloris was very amusing in her facial expressions and body language. Their ultimate coming-together was nicely done and very genuine. Well done!

EDDIE: Francis Garland gave an endearing, likeable performance as the good-natured, slightly geeky cop whose love for Deloris was sincerely portrayed and resulted in him proving to be the hero of the hour! Francis' big solo number "I Could Be That Guy" was a highlight, very well sung and very funny; the costume change within the routine was cleverly contrived. Well done!

CURTIS: David Slater brought his usual professional flair for characterisation to the role of Deloris' nemesis, gang-leader Curtis. Sporting a pony tail and the height of 1970s fashion "don'ts", David played this thoroughly unpleasant hood with his tongue firmly in his cheek, strutting his moves with considerable élan! His number "When I Find My Baby", accompanied by his partners in crime, was a real hit with the audience!

MONSIGNOR O'HARA: Stewart Adkins is always great value in whatever part he does, and the small but amusing role of the Monsignor was no exception. He had an effective Irish accent, and was droll in his line delivery and facial reactions. There was also good pair playing with the Mother Superior. It was just a shame that the part didn't give us much of an opportunity to hear Stewart's resonant singing voice!

JOEY, TJ & PABLO: Played by Philip Spurgeon, William Hackett and Ryan Wuyts, Curtis' three "henchmen" were beautifully contrasted in terms of their appearance and personalities. They provided much of the comedy in the show with their inept behaviour and interactions with Curtis and each other. Each actor had a great sense of fun and their big number "The Lady in the Long Black Dress", which contained some hilarious 70s dancing, rightly brought the house down! Well done guys!

MICHELLE & TINA: Katie Galley and Hattie Gribben offered "fabulous" support as Deloris' backing singers in the opening numbers "Take Me To Heaven" and "Fabulous Baby", in which their performances (along with Corrina's) really set the tone and standard for the rest of the show. Both girls looked just right and performed with lots of 70's sass in their vocals and movements!

ERNIE: Darryl Warnaar really impressed me in last year's production of "Cinderella" and on this occasion he again demonstrated real ability in characterisation and musical theatre performance in his small role, and as a key member of the ensemble.

THE NUNS: Wow! This talented group of ladies were crucial to the ultimate success of the show. They had a lot to do throughout the performance, and demonstrated tight, outstanding team work in their vocal, movement and acting skills. From their "out of tune" opening scene through to the vocal fireworks of the finale, there was a lovely

balance of laughter and pathos in their journey. Within the sisterhood, Susy Hawkes-Dighton and Anita Goold, had their moments to shine and there were three lovely characterisations from Aimee Hart, outstanding as the shy and unwordly SISTER MARY ROBERT, with her wonderfully sung solo “The Life I Never Led”, Emma Loring, full of exuberance and cheerful optimism as SISTER MARY PATRICK, and an unrecognisable Rhianna Howard, hilarious as the plain speaking, rapping SISTER MARY LAZARUS. Very well done to you all!

ENSEMBLE/DANCERS: There was commendable work from the ensemble, in various guises, who participated in the company numbers with great enthusiasm, enjoyment and commitment.

SUMMATION

This production was a big hit for WAOS in every department. With strong production and performance values, the whole company gave the audience a wonderfully entertaining evening in this popular, and crowd-pleasing, musical.

Best wishes
Andrew Hodgson (Adjudicator)