

The Sound of Music

Friday 31st October 2014

Adjudicator: William Hooper.

Co-adjudicator: Andrew Hodgson (who attended on Thursday 30th October).

Introduction

Ah, 'The Sound of Music'. So often derided as sentimental, cheesy schmaltz, it is, in fact, without doubt, one of the greats of the Broadway musical cannon: performed and performed again, by professionals and amateurs alike; filling theatres repeatedly as it does. This was the last of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals and, like so many of their previous shows, it lives on in a timeless magic, causing hearts to soar and toes to tap – repeatedly. Oscar Hammerstein may not have been the most naturally-gifted of writers, but he had a wonderful, folksy optimism, and a sublime capacity to capture the human spirit in all its beauty and indomitability; putting substance before style, and honesty of characterisation at the heart of his musicals. Richard Rodgers, by contrast, had all the talent in the world, and used it to good effect in some of the greatest Broadway tunes ever written. Together, their musicals will live as long as musical theatre lives.

WAOS have, in my experience, enjoyed something of a purple patch in recent times, producing a number of exceptionally good shows, with strong casts and intelligent and imaginative direction. The Sound of Music is so familiar to audiences, and so often performed, that many productions can appear tired and a little stale. The challenge, therefore, was for WAOS to sprinkle a bit of fresh magic on the show, and bring the story, the characters and the songs fully to life, and make it seem as fresh and joyful as it did 55 years ago. No easy task, but given this group's recent history, hopes were certainly high.

Front-of-House

I'm aware of the work that has been on-going to make Witham Public Hall a viable, going concern, and everyone involved deserves a great deal of praise for their efforts. It is a lovely venue, and one I always enjoy coming to. This was reflected in the friendly and efficient welcome we received upon arrival (given our last-minute arrival, the efficiency was particularly appreciated). First perceptions of a theatre are incredibly important, and generate a mood in the theatre-goer which can carry through into their enjoyment, or otherwise, of the show. The front-of-house team here deserve praise for being well-organised, effective and, as I say, friendly; creating the right mood as we took our well-appointed and comfortable seats.

The programme looked professional and was very informative. One small disappointment was the lack of photos and profiles for anyone other than Maria and the von Trapp family. I understand that this was probably due to lack of space, but there were some interesting performers, some of whom I wasn't familiar with, and it would have been useful to read about them. But, as I say, a very minor point.

Set design, construction and properties

One of the issues that can sometimes lead to 'Operatic Society' productions seeming a little tired, is the set. These are often sets that have done the rounds of numerous touring and amateur productions – and it shows! It may be that the set used in this production has also done the rounds, I don't know. But to this observer, the set was a very welcome change. Big, lavish sets can be nice, but are not necessary to convey the sense of place, or to create the necessary aesthetic effect. In this instance, a more minimalist approach proved extremely effective, with the tokens of set used instead. In particular, the large windows at the back of the Von Trapp residence, when complemented by appropriate furnishings, did the job very well indeed. The audience certainly didn't miss out by not having a fully-walled set in front of them. The backdrop of the mountains and lake set the house in context very well. I also liked the arrangement for the terrace scenes. Again, simple but effective.

The Abbey, likewise, was conveyed by the simple stained-glass windows in front of black tabs. That told the audience all they needed to know about the location. Something that was, for me and my fellow adjudicator, slightly problematical, was the location of the Mother Abbess's Office. It was perfectly logical to position it down-stage right, outside the proscenium arch. However, this did mean that the acting space was extremely small, and led to the characters squeezing round the furniture and each other, and, at times, masking those who were speaking. It may have been possible, as an alternative, simply to bring on a desk and perhaps some small item of furniture on the front corner of the stage instead – which would have sufficed visually, while allowing much more space for the actors to move around. I do appreciate, though, that the arrangement you chose allowed you to keep the rest of the stage clear and save time – something much to be welcomed generally.

This was, however, one small comment on what was a very effective set for this production.

At the same time, well-judged efforts were made to use the auditorium as part of the set at times, to bring the audience more fully into the drama. The Nazi banners that appeared for the concert at the end were an extremely effective example of this.

Likewise with the props, which all seemed appropriate and effective: from Maria's guitar and the Von Trapp whistles through to the microphone used at the concert. Very good.

Lighting and Sound

Lighting for this production was, again, very effective. The stage was well lit, and good use was made of more focused lighting to focus in on specific parts of the action. This served to help point up the drama and focus the audience. The lightning effect was well done and used effectively.

The sound was also done well. I got the sense that some of the cast were miked, but certainly not all, and not, unless I'm mistaken, the principals. It was, I'm guessing, aimed at subtly adding to the sound at certain points. As such, it fulfilled its purpose without taking away the vital connection between actor and audience. Meanwhile, the various sound effects, such as the thunder, and the bells at the Abbey, worked very well.

Costumes and Make-up

Costuming this show is no small feat; indeed, a huge amount of effort is required, not only in terms of numbers, but getting the right costumes for the characters and in the right period. Both my fellow adjudicator and I felt that the costumes for this show were exceptionally good. All the principal characters looked the part. More significantly, the wider cast also were spot on in what they were wearing. Details, for example, like the smart outfits of the house staff – Frau Schmidt and Franz - really fitted the bill. The elegant outfits of both the men and women at the ball were excellent and varied, and helped create a beautiful stage picture. The contrast between Maria and Elsa, something which I think is an important factor in the writing, was well pointed up by their contrasting outfits. The Nazi uniforms all looked realistic. Most of all, the Von Trapp children were extremely well costumed. I particularly liked the improvised clothes made from the curtains – really good.

Hair and make-up looked good and unobtrusive. Hair can be an area where a group's attention to detail falls down slightly. Not here – the hair of the men and women, boys and girls, all looked right for the late 1930s. In particular, the children's hair was very well done to denote both the era and their age. Elsa's hair, as with her costume, really did help capture her character exceptionally well.

Music and Choreography

Music is the driving force of any musical, even when, as with R&H, they are termed as 'musical plays'. It's the music that sets the tempo and generates the mood for all that follows. As a result, the role of the musical director is fundamental in generating the right feel and, crucially, the energy for the show. I felt the music for this show was spot on. It struck the right note (so to speak) with its smooth tones and drawing out the subtleties in the writing. Richard Rodgers was no fool, and knew precisely how to generate the right mood and tell the audience precisely what's happening and how people are thinking. Susannah was clearly alive to this and really brought out the highs and lows in the score. The band she commandeered was very well-drilled and created a lovely, professional and melodious tone. Pit orchestras can be quite sparse at times. In this instance, they sounded much more than the sum of their parts, and this is a great tribute to their efforts. Well done.

The singing in the show was a real highlight. The main principals all sang well, and the cast singing generally was strong. The choral singing from the nuns was beautiful at the start and for the wedding scene. I felt they lost their way a little bit prior to the interval, but, singing off-stage and away from the MD can be a disorienting experience and difficult to maintain. But, again, this was a minor point. Some lovely singing and clearly enunciated to ensure we heard the words. Again, well done!

Writing as someone whose capacity to move elegantly across a stage is virtually zero, I've always appreciated choreographers who can create moves which all cast members are able to learn and follow, but which still generate a good visual image and convey the mood of the music, the drama and characters well. There were some very good examples of this in the show. From 'How do you solve a problem' through Do-Re-Me', the ball scene, and 'No way to stop it', and all the full company scenes, the choreography was exceptionally well crafted – created moves that the cast seemed comfortable with and generated the right mood and energy for the music and moment. Often, they were quite simple moves, but these can be so effective, as was borne out. Maria takes on a lot of the singing in this show and had very well-designed moves to match and, as with the rest of the cast, carried them out with elan. A really notable moment was in '16 going on 17', where both Liesl and Rolf demonstrated a real elegance in their movement and dancing. At that point I was making a note about 'another simple but effective piece of choreography' when suddenly the dancing reached a whole

new level. Very effective and tastefully done – conveying well the growing affection and intimacy between the two characters. Well done.

Production

As I said at the start, this is a great musical, but one that is almost too familiar to audiences. I really wanted to see a fresh production. Rodgers and Hammerstein had exceptionally high standards, and would, no doubt, be rather disappointed by the way their musicals have become seen as tired, hackneyed and lacking in depth or genuine emotion. This is, of course, nonsense. It is the fault of successive productions which have been unimaginative, which have gone through the motions and not really thought carefully enough about the characters, the drama, the music, and brought a real human quality to the work. Both my colleague and I were delighted with the way you approached this show, and the freshness and humanity you generated. This was, in big part, through excellent casting – a real example of fitting the right people in the right parts – but also due to some intelligent, thoughtful and imaginative direction. I loved the use of the auditorium, both for the various processions and, most of all, for the concert. It really drew us into the story and actually felt quite chilling, being flanked by the Nazi soldiers. Generally speaking, the blocking of the dialogue was good, although, as mentioned earlier, the tight squeeze in the Mother Abbess's office did lead to some masking problems. Likewise at the ball, where the neat diagonal line of the children could, at the angle from which my colleague was watching, hide them all in a straight line, behind one another. It was from my more central position, but clearly, given the significance of the moment, it was important to have them all in view. That said, I thought the positioning of the group scenes was really good. There were some wonderful stage pictures generated by the cast's position during that same scene. I also loved the positioning of the children around Maria for the start of Do-Re-Me – lovely.

There were times, early on, when I felt I wanted the dialogue to move a little more quickly, but generally, the scenes were pacy and full of life and energy. Crucially, this was a production that successfully brought the story to life, where the scenes moved quickly, as did the changes between them, and everyone looked comfortable and confident in their roles. A pleasure to sit and watch.

The Acting

This show was notable for its excellent casting – get the right cast and you're half-way there. This enabled the cast to feel comfortable in their roles and really generate the personalities and characterisations to the full. All the characters spoke well and with appropriate projection. They all worked well together, moved confidently and brought the requisite energy and life to the proceedings.

Maria Rainer – Corrina Wilson

One of the prize roles in musical theatre, and one of local theatre's prize performers to fill it. Having previously seen Corrina in R&H's first musical, Oklahoma, it was great to see her take the lead in their last show together. Corrina brought such personality and freshness to the part of Maria, with a mixture of youthful exuberance, wide-eyed innocence and virtue, and a capacity for love that was ultimately fulfilled, both maternally and romantically. Corrina showed a huge amount of energy, giving everything on stage, with bright movement and a strong voice. She took the audience on the journey with her, from the innocence of the Abbey, through her voyage of discovery with the Von Trapp children, through to her triumph at the realisation of love. Most of all, she displayed her beautiful singing voice to great effect. It was wonderful to hear those songs sung properly. A lovely performance. Well done!

Captain Georg von Trapp – Niels Bradley

I was extremely surprised to read (after the show) that this was Niels's first leading role. WOAS are certainly very lucky to have him in the group, and he fitted this role very well indeed. He looked the part – so often, the Von Trapp casting is a little awry – with the sufficient mixture of experience but not too old, clear, natural authority, but with an underlying softness and charm, which is all fundamental to the story being believable. His interaction with Maria, Max, Elsa and the children was good, he spoke his lines with a calm authority, and sang well. Crucially, perhaps because of a mixture of all of the above, his changing attitude towards his children and growing love for Maria, did not jar, but was totally believable. An enjoyable performance.

The Mother Abbess – Janet Moore

It was an absolute joy to hear Janet sing. As the Mother Abbess, Janet combined a calm authority with a softer, maternal streak – something that came out so touchingly in her relationship with Maria. Janet spoke her dialogue well and interacted nicely with the other nuns and, as mentioned, particularly with Maria. But it was her singing that became, for me, one of the enduring memories of the evening. In My Favourite Things we got a foretaste of what was to come, and then we got Climb Every Mountain: a lovely, stirring song at any time, but so lovely to hear Janet sing it. I certainly wasn't the only one going into the interval wiping away tears, and then having to repeat the exercise at the end of the evening. A lovely, contralto voice, and one which gave full vent to the song. Wonderful to hear!

Max Detweiler – Tom Whelan

I enjoyed Tom's interpretation of Max. He conveyed a great deal of the likeable, avuncular figure that Max is, and spoke and sang well. His interaction, with Von Trapp, Elsa and the children, was very good, as was his movement and energy in the songs. There

were moments in the second half, when I felt that his energy levels was waining a tad, and perhaps, as a corollary to this, his MC-ing of the concert lacked a little of the vibrancy I was looking to see, but all in all, an enjoyable performance and a very reassuring presence on stage.

Elsa Schraeder – Julie Codling

Both my fellow adjudicator and I felt that Julie was outstanding as Elsa. It was a complete performance: the voice, the expressions, the body language, the movement, the emotion, it encapsulated the part really well. From the moment Julie walked on stage, she was Elsa, and all her mannerisms, her lovely facial expressions and poise conveyed the character to a T. I particularly liked the way she interacted with Maria – such subtlety in her reactions. The way that she responded to Maria's congratulations on her marriage was excellent. Julie really got this character and achieved an excellent performance. Well done!

Rolf Gruber – Edward Tunningley

Edward acted and sang exceptionally well. Rolf is a young man with a clear sense of himself. Edward conveyed this with confidence. He displayed a lovely singing voice and danced well in '16 going on 17'. Importantly, the transition from his early appearance to his later appearances was well done and believable. Because of the groundwork he'd done, his final act of goodness towards Liesl and the Von Trapp family was utterly believable. A good performance.

Sister Bertha – Shelly Fisher

Shelly captured the character of Bertha well. Suitably strait-laced in her attitude, she conveyed her feelings towards Maria well. Working effectively with her fellow nuns, she sang and spoke with confidence.

Sister Margareta – Michelle Jesse

It was great to see the contrast between the nuns, a contrast that is well marked between Bertha, Margareta and Sophia. Michelle successfully brought out the warmth and understanding in Margareta, both through her dialogue and expressions. Her singing voice was good, and added greatly to their ensemble singing.

Sister Sophia – Constance Lawton

Another contrast, Constance was a very good Sophia. As with her fellow nuns, she projected her character well, with good facial expressions and movement. Her dialogue was confidently played, as was her singing. Along with her colleagues, she coped well with the limited space stage-left, and really gave an enjoyable performance.

Franz – Edward Groombridge

The part of Franz is not the easiest to pitch. It's a real mixture of being a faithful and loyal member of staff but with a certain coldness as well. It's therefore no small compliment to say that I felt Edward played the part really well. He was confident and upright in his posture, firm in his delivery of lines, and moved very correctly around the stage. His speaking voice was good, and he moved with a forthright attitude and certainty which spoke volumes for his character.

Frau Schmidt – Hilary Watling

Another really good example of excellent casting, I really enjoyed Hilary's interpretation. She effectively captured the essence of Frau Schmidt, in her stern and efficient manner, facial expressions, delivery of lines and movement around the stage. Crucially, one would need no introduction to understand her role in the household and relationship with the children. Another well-pitched performance, well delivered.

Herr Zeller – Trevor Marks

A relatively small role, but a character who plays an important part in proceedings, Trevor was a strong presence on stage and met the demands of the part well. He understood the role, adopting a stern and officious tone, and spoke with confidence and clarity, not to mention a little menace!

Admiral von Schreiber – Richard McNeill

Von Schreiber may only make a fleeting appearance, but one that plays a crucial part in the plot. Richard fitted the role well. He looked commanding and spoke with authority, using his few lines to convey well the character and the difficulty of the position that Von Trap found himself in.

The children

The Von Trap children are, of course a key part of this story. Both my colleague and I really enjoyed their performances and were very impressed with their confidence and ability on stage. They worked extremely well together, as well as with Maria, gave expressive performances, and sang and moved with confidence.

Liesl – Faith Rogers

As the most mature and emotionally complex of the children's roles, Faith coped extremely well – speaking confidently, projecting her changing emotions, working well with the other children, and the adults. She connected well with Maria and is evidently a lovely dancer – something she showed to good effect in her scenes with Rolf, which were very touching.

Friedrich – Charlie Smith

Charlie really got into this part. You could see his feelings and emotions in every expression on his face. Full of life and spirit, he spoke and sang very well.

Louisa – Olivia Herbert

Another strong and confident performance, Olivia understood her character well, spoke and sang well, and conveyed her emotions very effectively.

Kurt – Fraser McLauchlan

A lovely performance from Fraser: he knew his part, understood his role, and, as with the others, through his dialogue and singing, conveyed it all with spirit and energy on stage.

Brigitta – Clara Alden-Smith

Clara truly lived up to the character of Brigitta – a very different, independent young lady, not afraid to speak her mind. Clara fulfilled this role well, conveying good expression and working well with her siblings as she did so.

Marta – Poppy Fisher

Poppy was lovely as Marta – managing to get her character across well in the lines she had. She moved around the stage with enthusiasm and really made the most of her part.

Gretl – Ella Bradley

Last but certainly not least, we had Ella, who was excellent as Gretl. It's not always easy to convey emotions and characters on a big stage in a big hall, but Ella certainly did this. Her feelings came over very well, she spoke confidently and I particularly liked her relationship with Maria, which came over very effectively.

Chorus – Postulants, Nuns, Soldiers and Ball Guests

One of the hallmarks of this production was the all-round quality and strength in depth of the cast. This was borne out by the chorus movement and singing. The group scenes in the abbey, particularly with the wedding scene and general choral singing were very good indeed. The soldiers moved and acted with confidence and menace, and the ball scene was exceptionally well played, with good groups looking very relaxed and natural, and with good dancing and singing.

Conclusion

I think it's fair to say that there must be countless Rodgers and Hammerstein productions each year which leave the great duo turning in their graves. Happily, this one, by contrast, will have simply left them cursing their luck that they weren't able to get tickets. Both my colleague and I really enjoyed this production, appreciated the excellent casting, and the performances that came out of it; the hard work backstage and the thought and imagination that had gone into its production.

Thank you all for a really enjoyable evening. WAOS are a group that are raising the bar for operatic societies in north Essex. I look forward to seeing your next production.

With best wishes

Will Hooper (adjudicator)
North Essex Theatre Guild