

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2014-15

Group: WITHAM AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY
Production: THE ADDAMS FAMILY
Adjudication Date: 27/4/2015 and 1/5/2015
Venue: WITHAM PUBLIC HALL
Adjudicator: Dawn King /Andrew Hodgson

INTRODUCTION:

It was with considerable interest that I went to watch this production, which premiered in the UK as an amateur production last year. A new musical, based on a well-known TV series, presents considerable challenges, not least in that the audience expect a fair representation of those characters on the stage, and, knowing the limitations of the Public Hall I was particularly keen to see how the challenges of the set had been addressed.

The pre-show publicity had been excellent, and subtle hints of the the 'spooky' theme were evident in the foyer. We received the usual warm welcome from Patsy Page and the front desk staff, and were efficiently shown to our seats by the well-presented front of house team.

The programme was colourful and informative, although I did wonder whether the licensing conditions may have been breached by use of such small print on the front cover, which was impossible to read. Looking at the age of many of the participants, it was evident that the youth policy of this society is paying huge dividends, and that WOW is really integrating well with its parent body.

SET AND PROPS:

The use of projection as well as traditional set was excellent, and allowed for pretty smooth and efficient changes between scenes. The opening projection of the Addam's family graveyard was particularly effective, and raised levels allowed for the large chorus to be accommodated as they emerged from their graves. As noted in previous productions, Nicky uses these levels well to create very good pictures, in which every member of the chorus can be seen. We both very much liked the use of the steps.

Paul Lazell's stage cloths were excellent, and worked really well on the restricted stage. Each interior scene was well dressed with sufficient furniture to represent the boudoir/study/and other rooms without intruding on the movement. The playroom instrument of torture was nicely constructed and both Wednesday and Puglsey were very confident in using it, even on the first night.

There were some lovely props (I really loved the white violin case used by one of the chorus and the white bouquet used by the bride ancestor), and props in such scenes such as the Great Hall, were good. and also really liked the black settee and candlesticks.

COSTUME/MAKE UP /WIGS:

Principal costumes were very much dictated by the cartoon/TV character concepts, and were very faithful to that legacy, with good attention to detail. Each principal character wore their costume well, and I marvelled at the staying power of Morticia's dress! Gomez wore his dark suits with panache, Wednesdays footwear fitted the plain nature of her dress. Grandma Addams was delightfully eccentric in both dress/hair and character.

The Beineke family were attired in contrasting and conservative dress – an “all American” blazer and flannels for Lucas, grey suit for Mal, and a simpering lemon outfit for Alice. The latter was sensibly full given her antics on the table, and the strong chestnut of the wig contrasted nicely.

What was really spectacular however was the presentation of the chorus costume and make up – each member of the chorus had a very defined persona, representing characters from a range of periods. The use of creams/beige rather than a stark white ensured that the lighting and projection didn't ‘bounce’. Wigs were suitably dressed (although as a minor point, some chorus members needed to ensure all natural hair was concealed). Very, very well done to the wardrobe team.

LIGHTING/SOUND/PROJECTION:

With the combination of light and projection this was a complex show technically, but cues ran extremely smoothly, and to great effect. The opening projection really set the visual standard for the rest of the show, and immediately created the right mood for the introduction of the ancestors. Other exterior scenes were given a brighter tone whilst the interiors were warmly lit. The lighting on Grandma gave a good tone. Use of follow spot was good, although some performers (notably Festen) repeatedly moved out of light.

Sound effects had been carefully chosen, and were almost always well cued – I gather that any small glitches I may have noted on the first night were ironed out later in the week, and we both felt that this was an outstanding production in technical terms.

MUSIC/DANCE:

Geoff Osborne's strong musical leadership was immediately evident as the orchestra launched into the overture. The relatively modest number of players produced a well-rounded and tight sound, and whilst the music wasn't familiar, the robust tempo ensured that we were fully primed for the main production itself. The orchestra was never obtrusive, and complemented the vocal activity on stage very well.

The cast handled the technically challenging score very well. Chorus numbers were energetically delivered without loss of vocal quality. On occasion, the tempos of some principal numbers appeared to be a little laboured at times, particularly in the second act.

The choreography and standard of movement at this society is excellent, and this production was no exception to that rule. Chorus numbers were detailed and imaginative, and the company benefit from having a cohort of dancers who integrate well into the main routines.

PERFORMANCES:

Stewart Adkins (Gomez) – Stewart has tackled a range of very different and contrasting roles over the years, and can surely count this as one of his best. Stewart conveyed the torture that Wednesday's request caused him very convincingly, and, particularly during Act 1, held the stage well, moving the story forward with clear resonant diction and well timed humour. Stewart had clearly worked hard on his movement, but it did lack the Latin zest on occasion. There were occasions in Act 2 where the vocals seemed a little forced, but otherwise a very sound and rounded performance.

Constance Lawton (Morticia) –blessed with a lovely resonant voice, Constance looked stunning in her costume and wig. She was very commanding on stage, and exuded a calmness that indicated inner strength. The *Secrets* number with Alice was well conveyed with good pure tone. However I would have liked to see a bit more sensuousness in movement and the "twinkle in the eye" that is characteristic of Morticia.

Ashton Reed (Wednesday) – This was a very strong and mature performance from Ashton. She captured the character of Wednesday extremely well, bringing light and shade into her acting. She developed her relationship with both Lucas and Gomez extremely well, letting us see the single-mindedness which characterises Wednesday. Perhaps consideration of how to vary pace and posture/gesture in order to enhance the comedy aspects is something to think about for the future. Vocal interpretation was excellent, and Ashton handled movement and props effortlessly. Well done.

Fraser McLaughlin (Pugsley) – Here was another good characterisation, which didn't go "over the top", as it could so easily have done. Fraser's *What If* number was beautifully done, and the *Pulled* number with Wednesday was really well worked between them vocally, and the props handled well.

Trevor Marks (Fester) – This is a critical role in the production as Fester acts as a commentator on the action, so it was a little disappointing at times that the diction was not as clear as it might have been. I recorded that Fester also moved out of his light several times, but my colleague did not note this, so it may have been a "first night" thing. Fester does have one of the best emotive numbers in the production (*The Moon and Me*), and this was delivered beautifully

Neils Bradley (Mal) – Neils is obviously more comfortable with his acting than singing, and he gave a really convincing portrayal of the bored husband, unwilling to recognise the needs of his wife, and generally uncooperative with his son.

Corinna Wilson (Alice) – Corinna really threw herself into this part. Her diction was good, and she cultivated a good presentation of Alice as the fussy, all-American mid west housewife before her main Act 1 number - which was then became even more shocking because of the contrast. This number was outstandingly good – a strong vocal presentation was maintained despite the extreme physical contortions.

Ed Tunningley (Lucas) – Both Andrew and I thought that this was a very strong performance, both vocally and in terms of the dramatic interpretation. Ed presented a stereotypical American college boy, and provided a very good foil for Wednesday. The relationship with his parents was also nicely observed. He used space on the stage confidently and with purpose.

Edward Groombridge (Grandma) – An interesting choice in casting a man as Grandma, but Edward's interpretation of the role was spot on, and avoided the trap of falling into pantomime mode. Absolutely consistent in his walk and movement, the relationship with Wednesday and Pugsley was good, and comic timing excellent. I liked this a lot.

Richard Herring (Lurch) – Richard brings an imposing presence to the stage in all productions he is part of, but this one really allowed him to build character, which he did extremely well.

DIRECTION:

This was an ambitious production, and the society is to be commended for taking it on and giving the Witham audience and their members something different to get their teeth into – and it was evident that both audience and cast really enjoyed it! The script does have some good one-liners but fails to be anything other than mildly amusing, so whilst we both really enjoyed Act 1, we felt that Act 2 was structurally weak, and the music was repetitive and not particularly memorable.

That aside, the pace of the production was very good and there was evidence of good team work between cast and stage management, which meant that the many scene changes were achieved pretty seamlessly. Again, Nikki has done an excellent job in terms of the visual presentation and innovative choreography in the chorus numbers, although personally I did think that perhaps there were slightly too many people in the chorus, as some of the dance numbers became a bit self-limiting. There was real depth in the principal line up, and everyone had worked very well at adopting the characteristics pertinent to their role. However, I also loved the attention to detail that was evident throughout the production and the way that each ancestor was a very individual character who (by and large) maintained their “persona” throughout the performance.

Dawn King
20th May 2015