

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 21/22

WAOS

“Betty Blue Eyes”

Director: Claire Carr

Adjudicated by Andrew Hodgson and Sheila Foster 28/4/22

INTRODUCTION

Following their success with “Made in Dagenham”, this show proved to be an excellent choice for WAOS’ to celebrate their centenary year, and the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee. Also based on a popular British film, in this case Alan Bennett’s “A Private Function”, “Betty Blue Eyes” was a moderate success in the West End, and, like “M.I.D” is proving a popular choice for amateur musical theatre groups. The story is set in the late 40’s, and takes place at the time of Princess Elizabeth’s wedding to Prince Philip. The show offers a tuneful score, a plethora of great characters, a good script (retaining much of Bennett’s original dialogue), and of course that pig...!

FRONT OF HOUSE

As always, we received a warm welcome with excellent seats affording us a clear view of the stage, and coffee and biscuits at the interval, which was much appreciated. The raffle was dealt with efficiently, and quickly, although we couldn’t hear what the winning ticket numbers were. The programme was excellent; it was very colourfully designed and produced, and was full of information. It was great to see an almost full house at the Thursday performance we attended, with an atmosphere full of anticipation.

SETTING (incl. set dressing, stage management and props)

The action took place in an austere Northern town, within a parade of shops which provided lots of exits and entrances for the cast. At the back of the stage was a huge stained glass window (presumably from the local church?), which wouldn’t have been out of place in Notre Dame! Other scenes, such as the Chilvers’ house, and the farm (with an excellent pig sty), were set in front of it, and there were times it distracted, as it was so dominant, but the window did serve to reveal the stage of Grand Hotel Ballroom, which worked well. The sets were very authentically dressed with utilitarian furniture and a myriad of excellent period props, which added so much detail to the production. The many scene changes were conducted by a large and efficient stage crew, who were sometimes very visible, but given that space is limited at the Public Hall, they coped extremely well; an occasional thump and clunk could be forgiven! Well done to everyone involved in this aspect of the production.

LIGHTING/SOUND/EFFECTS

The show was atmospherically lit, to reflect the period, and different moods of the show, ranging from the grey austerity of the town, to the Hollywood glitz of such big production numbers as “Lionheart”. All the stage area was covered, and specials/spots

were used for effects such as the bombing of the Ballroom, which was effectively achieved. Cues were efficiently and seamlessly managed.

Generally, the sound quality was fine, with some good sound effects to add to the atmosphere of the production. The balance between the performers and the band was well judged, although a couple of mic cues were a tad slow. The whole technical aspect of the show showed imagination and good design.

COSTUMES/HAIR/MAKE-UP

As always at this address, the costumes, hair and make-up in the production were excellent. Last time it was the late 1960's, now it was twenty years earlier, but this was no problem for the WAOS wardrobe team who again demonstrated an eye for period detail and authenticity. Coats, hats, shoes, day and evening dresses, men's suits and hats, uniforms, handbags; a huge list of items were needed and provided. The show girl costumes were stunning, and Joyce's very quick change on stage, was cleverly, and magically, achieved. All the men looked very much of the period in terms of grooming (you could smell the brylcreem), although we weren't too sure about the full beards sported by a few men, including Lockwood, but this was a small detail. Ladies hairstyles (victory rolls and updos), and make-up, were just right, and we loved Veronica's schoolgirl plaits and beret. Very well done to everyone involved.

NOTE: We weren't sure if Betty the Pig counted as a costume or prop, but she was definitely a puppet, which (judging by the programme information) was created for the Mercury production. Wherever she came from, she was perfect; an absolute star!

MUSIC

Despite the length of the show, it had a fast pace, and this was greatly supported by the lively musical direction of Susannah Edom and the playing of her eight musicians. They produced a real period sound and offered excellent support to the singers, who sang with clarity and volume. It was clear that a lot of work had been done to produce singing "in character" so that it was an automatic extension of the acting. Joyce and Gilbert both had very strong voices that set a standard for the quality of vocal performance in the whole show!

PRODUCTION/CHOREOGRAPHY

One of our all time favourite WAOS shows was "Cinderella", which like "Betty Blue Eyes", was directed and choreographed by the talented and experienced Claire Carr. Once again, Claire showed her flair and imagination in the staging of this production. If we had one criticism, it was that the show felt too long at nearly three hours (particularly for such a light piece), and could have lost twenty minutes or so, particularly in the second half. However, this was more to do with the piece itself; the original story had been fleshed out by giving Joyce and Gilbert a back story, thus making the character of Joyce seem more sympathetic. Claire's production generally had a great pace throughout, only held up for necessary scene changes. She had drawn excellent performances from her large cast, who seemed very well rehearsed and confident in everything they did; they were clearly having a lot of fun. There was comedy but pathos too, and these elements were nicely balanced. Claire's choreography was excellent, and it was great to see an assigned team of dancers given plenty of opportunity to strut their stuff in routines like "Lionheart", which was a real

showstopper; glamorous with Hollywood references, the audience loved it. Claire's blocking of the show also demonstrated her choreographer's eye, with clear movement for all; attuned to the diverse abilities of the cast. There were some very effective tableaux, and scenes ended with a real punch; nothing just fizzled out. Very well done indeed!

PERFORMANCES

The cast were assured and confident. There was a great company feel to the production, and the northern accents were, on the whole, well managed and not overdone.

In the leading roles of Joyce and Gilbert Chilvers, Aimee Hart and Matt Bacon were perfectly cast. Aimee was a triple threat; acting, singing and dancing to a very high standard. She captured Joyce's snobbishness and frustration very ably but she was also sympathetic (particularly in the flash back), and really showed why Gilbert loved her, despite being hen-pecked by her. Aimee looked fabulous, and she had great comedy timing too! A superb performance! Matt had the more understated role of the put upon husband and son-in law, Gilbert. His performance complemented Aimee's exactly. His facial expressions, accent and diffident manner all seemed authentic and believable. Matt had a strong singing voice and combined comedy and pathos in his performance, particularly in his hapless dealings with pig-napped Betty! Very well done!

The hilarious role of Mother Dear is the biggest I have seen Fiona Bocking perform; she was delightful in the part created so memorably by Liz Smith. In the musical, it seems clearer that Joyce is obviously a chip off the old block! Mother's constant search for food, and the increased confusion over the Pig, were very funny indeed, with her involvement in the "Pig, no Pig" number being a highlight of the show! Well done Fiona!

The always reliable and impressive Stewart Adkins was everything the over-bearing and conniving Dr. Swaby needed to be. He was a dominant character (reminding us a bit of Fred Elliott from Coronation Street) with strong vocals and good comic acting and reactions. Stewart also worked very well with his two partners in crime!

The talented and highly experienced David Slater was a joy as Henry Allardyce, the most sympathetic of three conspirators, whose love for Betty the Pig, bordered on the weird, it has to be said! Kindly and genial, Henry was always trying to stand up to Swaby and found a kindred spirit in Gilbert; their performance of the title number was a delight. Very well done! Being younger, Danni Carr made Lockwood a contrasting character to Swaby and Allardyce, and although the part was less well drawn than the other two, Danni sang and acted with naturalness and believability, making his mark as a town big wig!

Ian Gilbert was outstanding as the Meat Inspector, Mr. Wormold. An even more outrageous character than in the film, Ian went about his dastardly deeds clad in black leather and terrifying everyone in a manner that reminded me of the Child Catcher in "Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang"! This larger than life portrayal was a mixture of menace and camp; it was a performance that threatened to go over the top but never did! Ian had very strong vocal and movement skills and was very funny indeed! A smashing performance!

Matt Waldie, Richard Herring, Joe Geddis, Ben Rolph, and Trevor Drury as various local butchers, a farmer and a policeman, created believable northern characters who

were crucial to the story and were authentic in their attitudes and behaviour, reflecting the fabric of the town and the period setting.

Amy Pryce, Robyn Gowers, Megan Abbott and Tracey Hackett all made their mark as various formidable ladies of the town, with each one out for herself, and wallowing in Gilbert's "Magic Fingers". We also liked the fact that each lady was very different to the others! Megan also shone as a lookalike Princess Elizabeth, escorted by Steve Rogers as a debonair Prince Philip. Maeve Borges was very funny when attempting to "vamp" Gilbert, but then showing her tough side when attempting to dupe Wormold. Carole Hart was suitably overdressed and superior in her manner as Mrs. Allardyce, whilst Poppy Borges-Willby was equally ghastly as her precocious school girl daughter, Veronica.

Betty the Pig, around whom all the action centred, was beautifully handled by Alice Mason, who created a really lovable character. We forgot Betty was a puppet as Alice's own personality brought her to life, with expressive movement and facial reactions. Well done!

Other small roles were nicely done by Celia Greaves, Elizabeth Chapman, Gary Rolph, and Ron Howe, with Anita Goold, Annette Maguire and Jodie Morris completing a strong ensemble.

Special mention must be made of the brilliant dancers and trios: Julie Slater, Katie Galley, Robyn Gowers, Rachel Ings, Kathryn Nichols, and Amy Pryce who shone in everything they did, very well done to you all!

SUMMATION

This was another high quality production from WAOS, which despite its length, was pacy, colourful, funny and very well staged by Claire Carr. There were excellent performances across the board, and the whole show was a lot of fun! The audience loved it! Thank you!

Best wishes

Andrew Hodgson and Sheila Foster (Adjudicators)