

Michael Gray's Blogspot

JACK THE RIPPER

WAOS at the Public Hall, Witham

03.05.2014

Jack the Ripper a musical? Why not, when grand opera, and Sweeney Todd happily spin tunes around the most horrific atrocities. And Oliver, that most family-friendly of shows, has its share of true crime and 'orrible murder. In fact Denis de Marne and Ron Pember's piece from the 1970s has many points of similarity with Bart's greatest hit, not least, in Witham's production, the backdrop of St Paul's, not normally visible from Whitechapel.

But the ingenious concept, which works really well here, alternates those mean streets with the escapist warmth of the Steam Packet. A Music Hall, complete with singalongs, melodramas and Master of Ceremonies, though, alas, without his gavel. The swift transition between the two is one of the strong points of Kerry King's production – dustbins become tables, a violent confrontation morphs into melodrama.

A large cast fills the stage, singing the choruses very impressively. And there are plenty of talented principals to carry the drama and the catchy numbers of Pember's score. David Slater is our Chairman, a strong personality commanding the stage with a fine singing voice. Marie Kelly – a real character, like most of those portrayed here – is beautifully interpreted by Keiley Hall [another fine vocalist], bringing bravado and pathos to the role of the streetwalker and soubrette. Emma Loring confidently takes on the unlikely combination of Queen Victoria and Lizzie. Montague Druitt, a fascinating if enigmatic figure, is strongly done by Stuart Adkins, and amongst the many colourful characters on display I was especially taken with Tom Whelan's Bluenose, doubled with the Duke of Clarence, one of the many names associated with the Ripper over the years.

Various suspects appear briefly in a kind of Gang Show number [I was disappointed that they didn't reprise their ditties in ensemble], one of many delightful touches, the rainy funeral and the graveside monologue another. The coppers in drag – though loved by the audience – could have done with some more ambitious choreography, true of many of the numbers. We longed for a few Consider Yourself moments from the chorus, for example. And not all of the dialogue was as lively and colourful as the music. But the pastiche score is well served by this enthusiastic company, and by MD James Tovey and his evocative little pit band. This unusual treatment of a popular penny dreadful is very entertainingly revived forty years after its première.