

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOW CASE FESTIVAL 2021/2022

ADJUDICATION

Group	Witham Amateur Operatic Society
Venue	Witham Public Hall
Date of Adjudication	27 th October 2021
Production	MADE IN DAGENHAM
Director	Nikki Mundell-Poole
Adjudicated by	Dawn King
Assisted by	Andrew Hodgson, George Emberson

FRONT OF HOUSE

The front of house and bar team was welcoming and efficient, as usual. Posters around the hall set the time period nicely and prompted a significant level of discussion amongst the audience around us.

The programme was substantial, bright, and informative, with text in a font/background that made for ease of reading in the theatre itself. However, given the extensive use of adult language throughout the production, I was surprised that there was no reference to this in any pre-show advertising that I saw, or the programme. Maybe I missed it?

The raffle organisation in this company is excellent and an example to others, but possibly the announcement volume needed to be a bit louder on the night we were there.

LIGHTING

With minimal set, the contribution of light and sound becomes critical in defining spaces, creating atmosphere and adding to mood. This was made immediately apparent preshow by the use of an open stage with floating gobo onto the set – an interesting and engaging device. As the show progressed however, my fellow adjudicator and I did feel that whilst the gobos were a nice touch, adding depth to states, sometimes they were too intense and slightly distracted from facial expression/ action.

We particularly noted the harsh white back-wash for scenes in the warehouse, and use of high intensity colour from behind in the America song and Scene 9. Subtle changes in intensity shifted the focus of scenes. Follow spots were used effectively to highlight singular actors, but on occasion seemed lost and distracted from the action.

As audience members, we were left with a nice ending image at the end of each Act achieved through clever use of light.

SOUND

Pre-show music was all from the time period of the show and set at a good level so as not to be intrusive, but to create an up-beat feel. This combined with the pre-show lighting state was a subtle but effective way of setting out the context of the play.

The use of the Big Ben SFX- nice way of showing the change in location - simple but effective. The - door bell SFX was effective but set at an unrealistic volume level

On the night we attended, the sound levels in the social club scene meant that we couldn't hear all contributions clearly from the comedian/club singer – but perhaps that was intentional, reflecting the difficulty of performing on the club circuit? Generally, the second act sound levels were a bit too loud, and there were - certain moments where the voices of actors were lost due to the volume of the band.

SET, STAGING AND STAGE MANAGEMENT

The set concept worked well and kept the show fluid as far as was possible. It was generally pacy in Act 1, but did lose some pace in Act 2. Changes were well rehearsed by the stage management team but I felt that the moveable flats would perhaps have been more swiftly handled if they were on castors, and that on occasion, there was too much set dressing (Hopkins house). The design did mean that there was loss of depth to the stage, which on occasion meant that there was a visual 'flatness', and when it did open up, as in Scene 6, there were other technical challenges to deal with. There were opportunities to define scene areas with light rather than set which were not used.

COSTUME, HAIR AND MAKE-UP

Costumes, hair and makeup was EXCELLENT, particularly for the women where the costume helped to define each character. A lot of effort had clearly gone into period detail in terms of shoes, hair and make-up. For the men, their period jackets or work clothes all looked authentic. There were some really flamboyant costumes used in the big chorus numbers – I particularly like the range used in *This is America*, and the Cortina girls outfits really took us back, and pointed up issues that still continue today.

PROPS/FURNITURE

Because the time period of the piece was so clearly defined the choice of props and furniture needed to be carefully researched and sourced, and there was great attention to detail: thermos flasks/clocks etc. – and of course the sewing machines! There was little to fault in this aspect of the production, other than a view that there was almost too much set dressing, which on occasion made the changes feel longer than needed.

MUSIC

The music was derivative of the 60's very pacy and suited the piece if not very memorable. Principal vocals were generally very strong and good, and the chorus numbers were well rehearsed, with clear diction and phrasing. It was so good to see 15 men on stage making a good sound, it really adds to things!

Because a number of the songs added to the narrative of the story, the ability to convey meaning and text was really important. Connie's song 'Same Old Story' had some depth and that 'The Letter' and 'Ideal World' were a thoughtful, character building contrasts to some of the other numbers.

We were impressed with the playing of the band, and their tonality blended well with the vocals, particularly in Act 1 whilst the style contributed well to the overall 60's feel. They also covered the many scene changes well!

CHOREOGRAPHY

With limited space the room for adventurous choreography was limited. What we got was relatively simple movement, but slick and well-drilled, with every member of the cast engaged and presenting well.

CHOICE OF PRODUCTION / PERFORMANCE – GENERAL

A challenging choice of production – not only because musicals stemming from films frequently don't have the same impact, but because this one is based around relatively local events which occurred in living memory of many of the audience. The production also reminds us about other issues of the sixties – corporal punishment in schools, the changing expectation of girls in education, the marginalised role of women in politics and unions, and the powerful influence of American business interests in the British way of life.

Made in Dagenham manages to combine these complex issues into a pithy and entertaining production – with much appeal to a 50+ audience who will have personal memories of these matters. As musical theatre therefore, it relies more on acting ability than it does the music - you don't necessarily come away humming the songs, but you do reflect on the story and the characters.

WAOS managed this challenge superbly – from excellent casting to the detail of make-up and shoes. It was the perfect 'feel good' show for the times that we are in, where the audience could completely revel in live theatre, and participate in the inevitable standing ovation that results from a final number entitled '*Stand Up*'.

The production was colourful and energetic, with good movement in a limited space. It was clear that the cast were having a good time, and this does communicate itself to the audience! The rehearsal challenges facing director and MD must have been significant, but the end result was a credit to them both, and the whole production team.

However, the second half felt padded and too long, and the endless scene changes tended to slow the pace a bit here. In my opinion, and given the length of the show, perhaps the curtain calls bordered on being self-indulgent, and were certainly not consistent with Covid guidance!

PERFORMANCE

Rita O' Grady – Amy Pryce: This was a fine and sensitive portrayal of a woman going through a major transition in her life, where everything that she has – marriage, children, home is potentially to be sacrificed for a higher ideal. Amy's acting was strong and genuine, enabling us to immediately identify with her in the opening scenes as a working mother, but one with a sense of humour. Amy's connection with her husband and children was convincingly portrayed in the early scenes, thus making the dichotomy of her choices in Act 2 particularly realistic. Her growth in confidence was subtly done and sustained. Coupled with excellent vocal ability and interpretation, this was a really impressive performance, which carried the whole production, and importantly gave the other characters perspective.

Eddie O'Grady – Kris Tyler: Such a lovely, performance from Kris, again rooted in strong and naturalistic acting and completely believable. It would have been very easy to overplay in this role, but although 'one of the lads' in the early factory scenes, Kris managed to convey a sense of decency, with a lack of sophistication and a genuine love for Rita and his family. We really empathised with him when all the frameworks of his world break down, and there is no comfort in his male dominated world. The performance of The Letter was one of the show highlights for me – charged with emotion.

Very well done

Connie – Justine Ephgrave: We loved Connie! She looked as though she'd stepped out of the 60s and gave a very believable performance as the disillusioned but strong principled Union steward – convincing in her stance against management and the use of the grievance procedure, but with a quiet emotional pull in discussing the sacrifices she has made to progress the rights for working women. Justine has a good sense of comic timing, and this brought relief to what could have become a rather dour role. Her delivery of 'Same Old Story' was excellent.

The machinists – whether in the workroom, giving us insight into the intricacies of creating a car seat, in the social club, Barbara Castle's office or the O'Grady house, Rita's workmates created a genuine feeling of camaraderie – actively listening and responding to each situation whilst maintaining character created a great sense of friendly banter and familiarity between them. Great teamwork, and excellent handling of the sewing machines.

Sandra – Emily Smith: tall, willowy and with attitude, Emily was the perfect Cortina girl, and moved well in the social club scene. Her values might have been more self centred and superficial than Rita's but this was a character that we recognised, and who genuinely struggled to know how to cope with the strike.

Beryl – Rhianna Howard: What a gem of a part for someone like Rhianna, who has excellent comic timing and delivery, and used language and tone to great effect. While the language was often unashamedly coarse, the development of a self-deprecating stance and a sense of vulnerability for her character ensured that the audience warmed to her. Very well done.

Clare – Sammy-Jo Evans: I suspect that the 'Wosname' song was particularly difficult to learn, but her perfect confusion was delivered with confidence, and the diffidence in her character shone through. She became a character we sympathised with rather than being irritated by (mainly!!).

Cass – Megan Abbott: Practical and down to earth in many respects, but representative of thwarted ambition. A good performance whose contribution to the team was significant – I wanted to know her back story!

Monty – Michael Mundell-Poole: Michael's performance as Monty, the male supervisor secretly in love with Connie, was well presented and thoughtful. He was able to indicate a range of feelings and behaviours when dealing with two groups to whom he felt an allegiance, and we saw the conflict that created for him. The image of him eating alone, rather forlorn, showed a man whose world was changing round him and who didn't have the confidence to deal with it.

Barbara Castle – Corinna Wilson: Corinna revels in working on and delivering a defined character within a production, and her portrayal of the formidable Barbara Castle was excellent. We saw quite clearly the conflict that her character experienced between her concern for the striking women, her support for their cause, but her need to balance the wider political role and maintain her position in

the Cabinet. Corinna's demonstrated her excellent singing voice in a pointed reprise of 'Busy Woman' and great delivery of 'Ideal World'.

Harold Wilson – David Slater: David's caricature of Harold Wilson was amusing, but his entrance was so 'over the top' that sometimes diction was sacrificed to the energetic movement. He used his supporting 'Ministers/Civil servants' to great effect to point up the humour of the scene. The exit into the stationery cupboard and return was beautifully timed for comedic effect.

Jeremy Hopkins – Stewart Adkins: Stewart was well cast in this role as boss of Ford UK. He was able to show us the transition from arrogant and homophobic to someone out of his depth as the situation changed. Stewart is a very empathetic actor and he provided a strong reference point for the characters round him to play against, enabling them to progress their character development well.

Lisa Hopkins – Susy Hawkes-Dighton: Susy was every bit the upper class wife, moving gracefully and with control, and with well-modulated vocals. She looked stunning in her 60's costumes! Her relationship with Jeremy was clearly defined in the dinner party scene. Susy befriended the girls with a sense of social awkwardness, which, as the play progressed became more natural.

Bill – Jason Norton: A confident performance for a first time on stage! The scenes with Sid nicely avoided being over the top and drifting into panto. Instead, the sexist jokes and banter seemed to have a sinister, almost bullying edge – particularly when dealing with Monty.

Sid & Cortina Man – Franky Garland: As above for the Sid role – but Franky created a nice contrast with Cortina Man, who was somewhat slimy and unpleasant, but did a great rendition of Cortina!

Stan – Matt Waldie/ Barry – Fraser McLauchlan: Both actors gave nicely played characterisations that fitted within the fabric and general ensemble very well.

Tooley – Edward Groombridge: Ed was every inch the obnoxious American CEO brought in to stamp out the strike. Brash and swaggering, the aggressiveness of this character was laid bare for us all to see. In 'This is America' Ed's strong stage

presence and vocals were enhanced by the razzmatazz of chorus movement and costume. In his later encounter with Rita, his attitude, arrogance and actions were horribly convincing.

Gregory – Colin McLauchlan: A Personnel Manager from the time when staff were just another commodity in manufacturing. Ineffectual and subservient – and the part was perfectly nailed by Colin.

Sharon O’Grady & Graham O’Grady (Avalon Lawton /Josh Wilkinson)

Here were two characters who were central to the overall story – their individual circumstances giving a depth to the plot. Both of these young people will surely be around for many years to come – their performances were full of vigour, with clear and confident delivery in the opening scene and musical number. There was also a level of sensitivity displayed by both youngsters in the scenes that dealt with their own personal ambitions or troubles. Well done.

In summary, a joyful production enjoyed by all.

Dawn King

16 November 2021