

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD  
SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2025/2026

**“White Christmas”**

Witham Amateur Operatic Society (WAOS)

Directed by Nikki Mundell-Poole, assisted by Emma Loring & Alice Mason

Adjudicated by Rebecca Clemens, assisted by Andrew Hodgson

Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2025 at 19:30

**Front of House / Programme**

We were warmly welcomed into the theatre by the front of house team, all dressed in their finest attire. With programme and complimentary drink in hand, we were guided to our seats. It is always such a warm welcome by WAOS, thank you.

The 20 page A4 programme was well presented, featuring a full synopsis, cast biographies, and a range of rehearsal photos. It makes for a lovely keepsake for both cast and audience members alike.

**Set & Stage Management**

The stage was appropriately dressed with Christmas trees at either side, creating an immediate festive atmosphere. The set itself was simple yet effective, with an electric screen upstage centre, used to create multiple scenes throughout the show. This innovative approach worked particularly well in scenes such as the train sequence, “Snow”, where the movement of the train was beautifully conveyed. In other scenes such as the barn, the Western Front, and the Ed Sullivan Show, the screen effectively transported us between locations while reducing the need for elaborate scene changes. However, due to the screen’s size, staging occasionally felt restricted, narrowing the audience’s view, especially when framed by the red curtains. Without it, you may have been liberated to use entrances upstage for variety.

Scene changes were generally smooth and well managed, though a few transitions were slower than desired, including one undertaken in silence – some vamping from the band would have helped cover this. The removal of tables and chairs after “The Best Things Happen While You’re Dancing” was also slightly delayed, resulting in a short queue of performers waiting to exit with furniture. Keeping the cast on stage a little longer and staggering their exit could have helped to avoid this.

Although the Christmas trees were effective in framing the stage, you may have wished to create space here for tables and chairs to permanently be placed. These could have been used in the Ed Sullivan Show scenes, creating an illusion of space and dimension whilst also allowing plenty of space on stage for the performance. This would have also helped to avoid cluttering the wings during scene changes.

The creation of the train scene was a personal show highlight - the screen’s moving imagery and the clever staging of the train carriage gave the audience an engaging view of the action. This was effective and well executed, well done.

## **Props**

A good selection of props were used throughout, from newspapers and books on the train scene to the storage trunk in the dressing room, feather fans in “Sisters”, and ankle bells during the Western Front sequence. The switchboards and telephones used in Sheldrake’s Office were particularly impressive – intricate and fully functional in appearance.

It was, however, a shame to see plastic champagne glasses, which somewhat diminished the grandeur of the ‘Jimmy’s Back Room’ scene.

## **Wardrobe / Hair / Makeup**

The opening scene, set on Christmas Eve in 1944 on the Western Front, featured well-chosen and authentic costumes. The remainder of the musical, set in the 1950s, also displayed excellent attention to period detail.

There were some beautiful costumes – highlights included the dancer’s pink and green dresses and black and white suits in “I Love a Piano”, Betty’s striking black and white dress in “Love, You Didn’t Do Right”, the elegant fur coats on the train, and of course the iconic red and white outfits for the finale. While the costumes suited the characters and era well, some uneven hems were noticeable, and some of the dresses would have benefited from an extra petticoat for added shape.

Wigs were used for many of the characters – Martha’s and Judy’s suited both the actor and character. Betty’s, however, appeared a little ill-fitting and untidy in comparison.

## **Sound – Event Light & Sound**

Overall, the sound quality and balance were excellent. Dialogue and vocals were clear and well balanced with the band, achieving a consistent level of sound throughout. Well done!

## **Lighting – Trevor Drury**

The stage was consistently well lit, with thoughtful use of tone and atmosphere. The warmth of the studio lights during the Ed Sullivan Show contrasted beautifully with the cool lighting of the inn’s front porch.

One scene change into “The Best Things Happen While You’re Dancing” could have benefited from a slightly dimmer transition. There were also a few occasions where the spotlight caused some issues with shadows.

## **Direction & Choreography – Nikki Mundell-Poole (Assisted by Emma Loring & Alice Mason)**

The simple yet inventive set design was well realised, and the electric screen was effective, particularly so in the train scene. At times, it felt the screen was relied upon to create the scene and limited the creativity and opportunities within some scenes. It would have been nice to see some levelling on the stage to create some variety and height, this would have been especially helpful in the the Ed Sullivan Show and the Regency Room. During “The Best Things”, the chorus’ entrance from behind the red curtains felt hesitant and apologetic; perhaps an entrance from the wings could have allowed for greater confidence and flow.

Blocking was well planned, with clear movement and pleasing tableaux. The pace was generally good, with natural and engaging dialogue between the couples. The telephone scene, however, could have benefitted from greater energy and forward momentum to sustain the narrative drive.

The principal pairings were well cast, each complementing the other. Bob and Judy's initial friction was well conveyed, though a touch more development in their growing affection would have helped the transition feel more organic. Conversely, while Phil and Betty's affection was clear early on, a deeper exploration of their conflict in Act 2 would have added emotional depth.

The train scene and staging of "Snow" was a triumph – the layering of characters into the confined space was delightful, and the projected motion of the train enhanced the realism – a personal highlight.

In the final scene, the use of the main red curtain to frame the onstage "show" was clever, drawing us into the moment. The Christmas trees at either side of the stage were turned on, and once the curtain opened, the barn was revealed on the screen. The digital barn doors were opened to reveal a picturesque *white Christmas* beyond the barn doors, a clever touch. Unfortunately, there were no additional Christmas decorations added to the scene, and the lack of festive decoration made the ending feel slightly underwhelming. The foam snow was exciting to see.

Choreography throughout was creative and effective, from the crisp hat choreography in "Blue Skies" to the graceful simplicity of the fan choreography in "Sisters". A particular highlight was the choreography in "I Love a Piano", where the intricate hand-clapping sequence was executed with precision and energy – this must have taken a lot of time in rehearsals, and the effort paid off! Well done to all involved.

#### **Musical Direction / Band – Gerald Hinds**

It is always a pleasure to hear a live band in the theatre, and their contribution elevated the entire production. The sound was rich, well-rounded and sensitively balanced with the singers.

"Falling Out of Love Can Be Fun" exhibited some impressive vocal harmonies and it also showcased some beautiful blending of vocals by Judy and Betty. "Happy Holidays" provided a warm and lively opening. "Blue Skies" was enjoyable but slightly soprano-heavy; a more even balance of vocal parts would have enhanced the sound further.

#### **Paul Flynn – 'Bob Wallace'**

Paul created a strong portrayal of Wallace, with a commanding presence and convincing accent. He certainly looked the part!

Paul's singing sat comfortably within his vocal range with a pleasant tone, though be careful not to swallow vowel sounds which affected clarity. When performing with others, some additional blending and attention to intonation would further improve the ensemble sound.

Paul's chemistry with Davis was excellent, and there were some tender moments with Betty. A touch more balance in the love-hate dynamic would make the romantic development feel less abrupt.

**Nick Skinner – ‘Phil Davis’**

It was a pleasure to see Nick tread the boards after what I understand to have been some time. His portrayal of Davis was natural and endearing, with a lovely singing voice and convincing accent.

His relationships with Judy and Wallace were well established, though a little more development of his playful, flirtatious side in Act 2 would have enhanced the contrast.

A charming, seemingly effortless performance.

**Amy Marsh – ‘Betty Haynes’**

Amy showcased a well-developed voice with a warm, expressive tone, most notably so in “Love, You Didn’t Do Right By Me”. Her characterisation of Betty was heartfelt, and she was perfectly matched with Sarah Miles as Judy; their harmonies blended beautifully.

A touch more inquisitiveness at the top of “Count Your Blessings” would have added nuance, but this was a thoroughly enjoyable performance.

**Sarah Miles – ‘Judy Haynes’**

Sarah brought Judy to life with charm and energy, creating a likeable and engaging character with excellent stage presence. Her dance duet with Davis was particularly enjoyable.

Greater emotional variation in Act 2 would have added depth to Judy’s arc, particularly during Davis’ flirtations with the twins.

**David Slater – ‘General Henry Waverly’**

David’s portrayal of the General was authoritative and heartwarming, capturing both the character’s discipline and warmth. A confident, enjoyable performance.

**Corrina Groombridge – ‘Martha Watson’**

Corrina delivered a vibrant and confident portrayal of Martha, full of humour and charm. She demonstrated strong stage presence and a rich vocal tone, maintaining clarity between dialogue and song. I was impressed with Corrina’s ability to transfer the position of her speaking voice into the same space whilst singing, creating a fully embodied characterisation.

Corrina’s rendition of “Let Me Sing” was dynamic and engaging, showing excellent light and shade. Congratulations on this accomplished performance.

**Olivia Reynolds – ‘Susan Waverley’**

Olivia was a ray of sunshine each time she was on stage, demonstrating a confident line delivery, clear diction and great energy. I was particularly impressed with “Let Me Sing and I’m Happy Reprise”. A delightful young performer.

**Stephen Taylor – ‘Ralph Sheldrake’**

Stephen commanded the stage with a towering presence and good projection. Some greater tonal variation in delivery would have added further dimension to the role.

**Richard Herring – ‘Ezekiel Foster’**

A lovely, humorous performance. Richard’s purposeful ‘shuffle’ and perfectly timed one liners brought light-hearted moments to the show.

**Jason Norton – ‘Mike’**

Jason embraced the drama of the role with enthusiasm; what a fun part to play! Strong projection and stage presence made this a memorable performance.

**Chorus incl. Dancers**

The ensemble brought energy and commitment throughout. Highlights included “I Love a Piano” and “Snow”, both of which were visually striking and musically sound. The dancing was executed well, and it was evident everyone was having a fun time on stage.

**Summary**

Witham delivered a heart-warming production of “White Christmas”. Although there were occasions that could have benefited from a variation of staging and not relying so heavily on the screen in every scene, there were some lovely moments of creative staging, some strong solo performances, and ensemble choreography, altogether creating this festive piece of theatre.