

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD

SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2023/2024

“Calendar Girls – The Musical”

Witham Amateur Operatic Society

Directed by Nikki Mundell-Poole

Adjudicated by Rebecca Clemens, assisted by Caroline Fritz

Friday 26th April 2024

Introduction

“Calendar Girls – The Musical” is based on the movie of its namesake, following the true story of a group of middle-aged Yorkshire women who produce a nude calendar to raise money for Leukaemia. This is following the diagnosis and passing of John Clarke, the husband of a member of the Women’s Institute (W.I.).

This was quite a special evening, one filled with emotion, grief, and community spirit, not only from the characters on stage, but from the cast as Society members. There was not a dry eye in the house, and this was a special performance to witness.

Front of House & Programme

On arrival, we were warmly welcomed by the front of house team. We were shown to our seats and provided with a complimentary drink and programme. All front of house staff donned a sunflower on their lapel, making it a simple but effective way of identifying who was part of the team.

As we walked into the auditorium, we were struck by the wall of sunflowers to our left, and the screens either side of the stage. Both the wall and screens read ‘In Memorium’ with names of loved ones who had been lost. This was striking, and I was eager to find out more in the programme.

The programme is colourful and in keeping with the sunflower theme throughout the auditorium. It was detailed and provided a lot of information about the production and the fundraising achievements of the Society. Impressively, the society have raised (at the time of the programme being printed) £8,000 through their fundraising efforts, having produced their very own nude calendar.

The cast headshot photos were nicely shot in front of a Yorkshire dales setting, and it was lovely to see some rehearsal photos within the programme.

Set & Props

The musical is set in the Yorkshire village of Knapely, and scenes include the Village Hall, the Hospital, Village Green, Potting Shed, and Flower Shop.

The set was simple, with some nice foliage upstage left and a large piece of scenery upstage right, however it raised a few limitations:

- It was not entirely clear what the large piece of set represented, but we felt this could have been painted more effectively, perhaps as the Yorkshire Dales?

- The piece of set had two doors, which were used to store the hospital settee. This was an effective use of space, presumably due to limited space in the wings, however it was a shame this piece of set filled the stage for the duration of the show.
- Both the size of the set and the sign “Knapely Village Hall” (which was present throughout the show) limited the diversity of the scene-setting. Perhaps an additional screen downstage would have helped the audience move into the next scene. I do appreciate, however, there may be limitations within the venue that we are not aware of.

The stage was framed with the electronic screens at either side. These were used effectively throughout the show to support the change in location, e.g. ‘Harper’s Flower Bar’ to the right, and the ‘hospital waiting room’ on the left.

Steps were seen rising behind the set, and this was used at points in the show, however these could have been used more often, especially when there was a large number of cast on the stage.

Scene changes were typically smooth, however a few changes were made in a full lit stage; I’m not sure if this was due to safety reasons, but it was a shame these were not performed in low lighting.

The props used for the Calendar Girls photo shoot scene were well made, identifiable and cleverly integrated.

Wardrobe & Wigs

The costumes were in keeping with the time, colourful and comfortable! I particularly liked the bright pink valour tracksuit for Celia, the Christmas jumpers, and summer dresses at the Fayre. They were clear in identifying the season.

It wasn’t until John Clarke returned to the stage without any hair that I realised he must have used a wig prior; this proves the effectiveness of the style and colour choice. Well done.

Sound & Lighting

The performance was well lit throughout, with some effective lighting in the hospital scene and Harper’s Flower Bar. There was some beautiful soft lighting on the white screen at the back of the stage, portraying different times of the day.

There were times unfortunately where some cast members could not be heard above the orchestra, and would have benefited from further support from the sound desk. Of note, the final line of the show sung by Annie was inaudible, which was a shame.

Both teams worked well together, particularly during the calendar photo shoot scene; following each calendar photo taken on stage, the stage plunged into darkness, illuminated by the photo being revealed on both of the electronic screens with a camera sound effect. This was extremely effective!

Direction

The story is straight forward, characters are modern, and the musical doesn’t allow much opportunity for choreography. The most challenging aspect of this musical would have been portraying the deterioration and passing of John Clarke in Act 1, and the calendar photo shoot scene at the end of Act 2. We felt the calendar photo shoot scene was successful in its direction, enabling the actors to feel secure and confident before the screens were removed.

With any portrayal of a death on stage, there are difficulties in getting it get right for the majority of your audience members. In this sad scene, John passes away in the wheelchair, and then ascends the stairs, signalling (in our view!) his ascendance into ‘heaven’. We wonder if it would have been more effective for John to remain in the wheelchair

for the duration of the scene with some clever use of lighting, whilst the cast gather around the grave. John's transformation throughout his cancer treatment, however, was a real success.

It can be difficult to fit a large cast on a smaller stage, and this was typically done well. However on occasion, it was not always possible to see or appreciate the full cast.

Musical Direction

The six-piece band sounded fantastic under the baton of Karen Chinery. It's easy to forget there are live musicians in the pit when they sound so good; congratulations on an accomplished performance.

It was lovely to hear the full cast singing acapella for a bar or two during two of the numbers; they sounded full, well rounded and balanced.

'Chris Harper' – Constance Lawton

Constance portrayed the lead role of Chris confidently, bringing this irrepressible character to life. She provided some lovely light relief moments during scenes with Annie, with perfect comic timing and facial expressions. Constance's voice matched her character, singing "Sunflower" with passion and gusto. Well done on a great performance.

'Annie Clarke' – Susy Hawkes-Dighton

Susy's portrayal of the grieving Annie was beautiful; her grief was evident in her singing of "Scarborough" and "Kilimanjaro", and the harrowing hospital scenes. Susy's whispering, breathy tone aided the emotion through the singing. I would encourage not to hold onto the higher notes in the register, as the voice became tight whilst trying to portray the same level of emotion.

The friendship between Chris and Annie shone through, and they had a great rapport on stage; congratulations to both.

'Cora Green' – Alice Ward

Alice, portraying the W.I. pianist Cora, shines brightly in "Who Wants a Silent Night". Although Alice lost the words towards the end of the song she managed to recover well and didn't let this small mishap impact on a strong performance overall. Alice had a lovely relationship with her son on stage, along with the friendships with the leading ladies. Well done.

'Jessie Raistrick' – Carole Hart

Carole sang her solo "What Age Expects" well and provided another dimension to the leading ladies friendship group. It was particularly pleasing to hear such clear diction, given that the lyrics were both amusing and poignant. It was lovely to see each member shine differently, and I enjoyed Carole's portrayal.

'Celia Mortimer-Jones' – Michelle Bacon

Michelle portrayed Celia with a south of England accent, in comparison to her Yorkshire friends. I feel there were some missed opportunities to project and be the 'larger than life' character that this could have been. However, her song "So I've Had a Little Work Done" was performed well.

‘Ruth Reynolds’ – Rhoda Taylor

Rhoda’s portrayal of Ruth was shy and retiring, and a lovely contrast to the other ladies. Rhoda came out of her shell during the drunk “My Russian Friend and I”, and some very convincing drunk acting continued into the calendar photo shoot scene. This did make me laugh!

‘Marie Witherford’ – Celia Greaves

Marie is the straight laced, ‘sensible’ W.I. Chairwoman; it was lovely to see Celia in this role, this was a good fit. Some slips of the Yorkshire accent at times, however Celia presented this character confidently.

‘John Clarke’ – Jason Norton

John, the husband of Annie, presents boldly and full of humour in his first scene. Following his cancer diagnosis, John visibly deteriorates throughout the first act. Jason portrayed this beautifully, and it was heart-breaking to see the physical transformation. Congratulations on a beautiful, poignant performance.

‘Rod Harper’ – Michael Mundell-Poole

Rod, the husband of Chris, is portrayed confidently and with great comic timing by Michael. Well paired with Constance, this was a believable duo, and it was fun to introduce their son ‘Danny’ into some of the scenes. Well done.

‘Danny Harper’ – Will Hackett

Will played the son of Chris and Rod Harper; he has a lovely stage presence, and portrayed a believable teenage angst opposite his on-stage (and off-stage!) love interest, ‘Jenny’. The young characters Danny, Jenny and Tommo, provided a parallel story line focusing on their teenage troubles, giving some light relief to the emotional main storyline. Well done to the trio.

‘Jenny Witherford’ – Liv Possee

‘Jenny’ is the daughter of the W.I. Chairwoman, Marie. Immediately from her demeanour on stage in the first scene, you understand that Jenny is the ‘typical teenager’; popped leg, chewing gum, and a bottle of vodka in her blazer pocket! Liv has a lovely voice and was matched well against her on-stage love interest, Danny.

‘Tommo Green’ – Ben Rolph

Tommo is the cheeky friend of the group, and Ben played this part well. He was well matched against the other two youngsters, and had a lovely tone to his singing voice.

Chorus

The cast included a small ensemble, and they were used in many of the W.I. scenes, the Fayre, and the calendar photo shoot scene. It was a shame to not be able to see the chorus when they were standing/sitting behind other cast members;

this was particularly noticeable during the W.I. scene with the benches behind one another. It may have been more effective to consider the benches at a right angle, providing more visibility for those at the back.

Some members of the chorus were given the task of covering the Calendar Girls during the photo shoot, and they did well to protect the ladies (only one early reveal which was recovered). Well done for supporting your cast members during what must have been a nerve wracking time.

Special mention to Anita Goold and Tracy Hackett as 'Miss Coffee' and 'Miss Tea' who joined the six 'Calendar Girls' and revealed all in the final scene, donned with their tea and coffee jugs.

Summary

Courage and nudity aside, this was an accomplished performance from the cast and crew. There were some stand out performances with strong and emotive vocals, with a strong sense of community spirit in Witham, and a true feeling of friendship on stage.

Congratulations on this thought provoking, heart-breaking performance; it felt like a very special show to be a part of. Good luck with the rest of your fundraising endeavours with the upcoming Sunflower Ball in May.

Rebecca Clemens

NETG Adjudicator