

NORTH ESSEX THEATRE GUILD SHOWCASE FESTIVAL 2024-25

WAOS

“SALAD DAYS” Directed by Emma Loring assisted by Constance Lawton
Adjudicated by Andrew Hodgson 23/10/24

INTRODUCTION

“Salad Days” originally opened in London in 1954 and went on to become one of the longest running British musicals of the pre-Andrew Lloyd Webber era. Julian Slade’s delightful musical is charming and quirky and creates nostalgia for an age of innocence that is sadly just a distant memory in our cynical world.

Having directed the show myself over a decade ago, and knowing how much my company, and our audiences, loved it, I was so pleased that WAOS had chosen to revive a musical that can make us laugh but also have a tear in our eye, whilst our feet are tapping! I know older shows can be a hard sell these days, and trying to attract younger audiences to them is difficult, but there was a good reason that they were so successful and they deserve to be seen!

FRONT OF HOUSE

As always at this address, we received a very warm and efficient welcome from the FOH team, all dressed for the period of the show. We had good seats, there was an array of refreshments (the specially made interval coffee was much appreciated) and a raffle. The attractive programme design was excellent; glossy, professional and very informative.

SETTING/ STAGE MANAGEMENT/PROPERTIES

Initially we saw a bare, haze hued stage with “Minnie, the Magic Piano” lit centre stage. (I wonder where she came from? She looked very familiar!) and then, as the action unfolded, pieces of scenery, with backcloths and curtains, were used to create the different scenes. A huge positive of this production was that clearly, a great deal of effort had gone into creating an accurate period feel. The set did this, adorned with very good furniture and an array of period props that showed excellent attention to detail. We particularly loved the hairdryer and the Knickerbocker Glory! The park bench and street lamp made the park look very authentic.

My companion absolutely loved the atmospheric Nightclub setting and the Flying Saucer with its flashing lights was spot on! There were a few glitches, particularly with a curtain that didn’t always open smoothly but the goodly stage management and props team were kept very busy with so many shortish scenes to be set, and removed. This was done efficiently, although occasionally served to slow up the pace of the show. In the scheme of things, this wasn’t really avoidable, unless the concept for the show had been more minimalistic.

LIGHTING AND SOUND

The technical aspects of the production were excellent. The lighting design really enhanced the set, costumes and action to create some lovely visuals, and an authentic 1950’s ambience to the production. Gobos were well-used, particularly in the park

scenes, and both the Egyptian Nightclub and Flying Saucer were made particularly atmospheric by the lighting. Despite a couple of slightly late cues, the lighting plot ensured that everything ran smoothly throughout the performance. Sound effects were also smoothly cued and very good, and although I initially thought the sound over-amplified, in fact we heard everything that was being said very clearly. The balance between the musicians and the singers was also well-achieved! Good work!

COSTUMES/HAIR/MAKE-UP

The Wardrobe team are to be congratulated on their superb work in creating a set of costumes that were so attuned to the period, setting and characters in “Salad Days”. The ladies “frocks” offered an array of colours and texture that was often dazzling. I understand that Karla, who played Jane, had made her own! This was a particular achievement, as I am not sure that she didn’t have a different outfit in nearly every scene? All the ladies costumes were enhanced by excellent accessories; make-up and hairstyling, including wigs. Given that most of the performers were playing several parts, they were often unrecognisable from scene to scene. Special commendation for the mind boggling creations that we saw in Ambrose’s fashion show! The men were attired as befitted their character and status; gentleman, tramp, policemen etc. Timothy’s different coloured pull-overs were a lovely touch. It was hard to believe that “Salad Days” was set only ten years before the arrival of the mini-skirt and the whole Carnaby Street look!

MUSIC

The trio of musicians, with David Mitchell as M.D. (a role shared with Franky Garland who was in it) did a great job in providing a bright, breezy sound that supported the performers very well. Slade’s tinkling melodies were played with a warmth and pace that set our toes tapping.

PRODUCTION/CHOREOGRAPHY

Director Emma Loring clearly loves “Salad Days”, and it showed; the production had a heart. My companion, who had never see the show before, commented that he really cared about what happened to Minnie, and those who looked after her. Emma, assisted by Constance Lawton, had staged the show faithfully, staying true to the material and the 1950’s period. The cast had worked hard on their “RP” accents and all the characters were clearly defined. The cast also coped well with some of the tongue-twisting lyrics, most notably in “Find Yourself Something To Do”. The ensemble work was good. The blocking of the production used the available stage space well, and there were some effective groupings. There was a tendency for some of the cast to deliver their lines straight out front, rather than to each other, but this may have been deliberate ploy to present a “period” style of performing. The choreography, by Emma and Heather Davis, was suitable for the show and attuned to the varying capabilities of the cast. The dancing in “Salad Days” is key to the story but should not be overly complicated as many of the characters do not even realise they CAN dance until the piano starts playing! I particularly enjoyed the staging of “It’s Easy to Sing” and its reprise, which was delightfully performed.

With so many good elements, the one area of the production that needed to be tighter was the pace. For a short, light piece, the performance felt long and the running time reflected this. The timing of lines, and the picking up of dialogue cues, needed to be sharper. As a result, some of the comedy scenes fell a bit flat. Having said that, Act 2 seemed to be more incisively played than the first half; the nightclub scene being a particular highlight of the production.

PERFORMANCES

The ensemble cast, playing several roles each, worked very well together and seemed to be solid on their lines. There were no prompts that I heard.

KARLA MARIE in the central role of Jane, looked exactly right and gave a strong, central performance with which we could empathise. Although Karla needed a little more pace in her line delivery occasionally, she had clearly worked hard on her RP accent, and she sang and danced charmingly. Karla played very well opposite FRANKY GARLAND as Timothy, who was excellent. His portrayal was totally grounded in the 1950's and he expressed his dialogue with wry humour as he observed the antics of the eccentric relatives around him. Franky sang and danced very well and made an attractive pairing with Karla, as Jane. Young AVALON LAWTON was an absolute delight, with her grace of movement, expressive reactions and body language in this completely mimed role. Troppo, about whom we learn virtually nothing, is usually played as a traditional Circus clown but in this production was almost like a sprite. This worked beautifully thanks to Avalon's performance. The always excellent STEWART ADKINS, held the stage with his confident acting and resonant singing in several roles. His Uncle Clam, was very funny in the "Hush, Hush" number and as the mysterious Tramp, complete with cockney accent, Stewart provided a strong core to the show as Minnie the Piano's guardian. We were amazed that newcomer HOLLY KERWICK was only seventeen. Her experienced characterisation as the "Debish", giggling Fiona was a joy! She had lovely comic timing, with a great laugh and facial reactions. Holly was also an accomplished singer and dancer; we hope to see a lot more of her in the future! She also shone as the "artist" in the ensemble numbers. FABIAN D'ANGELO was also making his WAOS debut as "man about town", Nigel, who made a nice contrast to the character of Tim. With his dark, personable looks, and good speaking voice, Fabian was well cast as this sophisticated character and he was effectively partnered opposite Holly as Fiona. He also made a comic impression as the Bishop in Act 1. Bringing a touch of 1950's nostalgia with memories of "Dixon of Dock Green", JOE GEDDIS played the hapless P.C. Boot, at the beck and call of the Inspector with whom he was amusingly paired in their long comic, dancing scene together. Nicely confused expressions from Joe, who clearly showed his admiration for the cockney voiced Rowena. She was played by SOPHIE EDRUPT another new asset to the group. Sophie was very funny when she was the compere of the fashion show, and when she flirted with Boot. We didn't recognise Sophie as the glamorous Egyptian singer Asphynxia, demonstrating a fabulously sultry singing voice in her "Sand in my Eyes" number. WAOS stalwart TREVOR DRURY played several roles, most notably as the initially staid and authoritative Police Inspector, who turned out to have hidden dancing depths, which he demonstrated very amusingly in his scene with Boot. With an excellent "cut glass" accent and looking very glamorous, MAEVE BORGES played Jane's snobbish mother, Lady Raeburn. Her big scene in the beauty parlour, in which she conducted a continuous phone conversation whilst being pummelled by the beauticians, was

impressively sustained by Maeve, who never faltered in her vocal delivery. Her duet with Tim's Mother was charmingly sung. ANITA GOOLD'S character, as Tim's concerned mother, was a nice contrast to Lady Raeburn. Anita, along with Celia and Richard, performed the tongue twisting "Find Yourself Something to Do" with clarity and confidence. Her duet at the end of the show, with Maeve was touching. Anita just needed to relax a little more in her body language at times. RICHARD HERRING had some great roles in the show. Jovial Astronaut Uncle Zed, Tim's concerned father and, most hilariously, as the trembling attaché, Fosdyke, which put us in mind of Julie Walters' famous "Two Soups" sketch! Richard's performance in "Hush, Hush", with Stewart and Franky, was a highlight of the production. CELIA GREAVES was wonderfully eccentric in her hat as the disapproving Aunt Prue, and very amusing as the sight deprived model in Ambroses' fashion show, which ended in mayhem! SHARON LINDSELL had several roles, all of which were clearly differentiated in looks and manner. Her main role as an impressively made up, and robotic, Electrode, was well sustained in voice and movement by Sharon in the flying saucer sequences. MATTHEW WALDIE had the plum role of the camp dress designer, Ambrose, who put me in mind of Hugh Paddick's character in the popular "wireless" programme "Round the Horn". Matthew was suitably outraged and exasperated as his fashion show turned to disaster! He was also a dedicated member of the ensemble. LYDIA ROSE & HELEN DUNN played a handful of roles in the ensemble and each had their own moment to shine. Helen's facial reactions were a particular delight in the beauty parlour sequence.

SUMMATION

It was a real joy to see WAOS reviving this charming musical. Although it needed a tighter running time, this production had warmth and, at times, pathos. It was clear the cast were having a good time and, as a result, so did the audience at the performance we attended.

Best wishes

Andrew Hodgson (Adjudicator) accompanied by Sally Leung.