



Society : East Berkshire Operatic Society  
Production : Boogie Nights  
Date : 12<sup>th</sup> May 2017  
Venue : Wilde Theatre  
Report by : Terry Hunt

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Show Report

Some 'Juke box' musicals work better than others. Boogie Nights, being a simple story, about a group of friends growing up in the 70's, and the Discotheque they frequented, is well pitched for enjoyable, light entertainment. Most of the music was exactly what it is...i.e. music to dance to, so there were no issues having to shoehorn a dubious storyline in, to fit the lyrics.

Much as the story is uncomplicated, the final twist about the true identities of the wedding couple, gives an unexpected, but nicely rounded finish, to the narrative.

Arriving at the Wilde Theatre (slightly last minute, owing to parking issues) was unlike most pre-theatre experiences. There seemed to be a real buzz around the front of house areas, and resonating beat of a nightclub.... or 'discotheque', somewhere in the building. With numerous patrons dressed up in 70's outfits for the evening, the audience were ready for a good evening, well before taking their seats.

Susan and I took our seats shortly before curtain up, but were still able to appreciate the cast on stage, enjoying a night at the disco. Unfortunately, we were a bit late to know if this was choreographed/directed action or if they were randomly milling about, however the gauze soon went out, the volume ramped up, the cast spilled out...and we were off.

The set was relatively simple, but effective. With the band featuring as part of the action it was nice to have them in a stage setting, on stage. Strictly speaking, it's unlikely the kind of lighting truss used to create a proscenium would have been around in a 70's disco, however, being adorned with a number of small par cans, it helped evoke the comparatively unsophisticated setting expected. The purple walls with the exit and wash rooms though passageways, were also suitably evocative.

Much as the DJ booth and bar both looked the part, they did look slightly squashed into the corners. If it was possible to have moved the upstage ends of the purple walls offstage just a foot or two, it would have made both pieces of the set more evident and brought them into the action a bit more.

Turning the walls to create the backdrop to the two living rooms, was a fast and efficient way of changing scenes. With the simple addition of seats, it was job done. In fact, with the exception of the bedroom, the scene changes were carried out so effectively, it's credit to **Duncan Bruce's** design and the cast/crew moving everything, that I almost didn't notice it happening.

I did feel the bedroom truck could have waited until the end of the song before being set, as it was distracting, and a short musical reprise of the song would have been enough to cover it. The cinema seats, being set at the angle they were, had Eamon's living room as a backing, so perhaps setting the seats centre stage with darkness behind, may have worked better.

All in all, a very good design, fit for purpose, so well done to Duncan and the construction/painting team, and to SM **Andrew Cooper** and all the backstage team, for what appeared to be a very smoothly run show.

Well done to Duncan for the projections, too. The 'Happy Days' and Star Wars titles added some great humour and animation. Very nice touches.

Clearly **Kelly Gates** and **Helen Prior** had gone to some effort for the set dressing, furniture and props. From the orange sofa, to the 'trim phone' and the guest appearance from two Chopper bikes, it was great to see the genuine articles. Eamon's sitting room was perhaps more 50's than 70's, but of course, furniture and décor was updated less frequently than in later years, so it made sense for Eamon's home to be less fashionable.

My feeling is that haze is generally overused by LX designers these days, however Boogie Nights is one of the shows where it helps create the right mood, especially as 70's discos were pretty much a smoky fog. **Michael Brenkley**'s design introduced a good balance of drama and subtle zoning. The 'home' scenes were gently lit with relatively bland colour palette, compared to the Boogie Nights scenes and the occasional creation of drama. In particular, the intense fuchsia colour used to backlight the girls singing 'Enough is Enough' while keeping them in open white/pale coloured follow spots, worked perfectly. It's the type of punchy lighting which worked well as it wasn't overused. The mirror ball was also saved for specific effects, rather than relentless use.

Flickering lighting for the cinema would have been a nice addition, however, I feel that the lighting lit the cast and set appropriately, and made an impact when it should have... which is exactly what LX should do!

It may have been tempting to use the star cloth more than it was, but I was happy to see that it was saved for very specific moments. Good job Michael, **Steve Davies** for smooth, timely operation and to **Ellen Kilvington** and **Mitchel Thorpe** on follow spots.

**Tom Horrox**'s SFX design and operation was perfectly well balanced during musical numbers. Sound from the relatively small band filled the auditorium nicely, without being overbearing, and all vocals were clear and audible. Obviously getting levels right for a musical is important, so credit to Tom for achieving this to great effect.

There were times when volume and tone were effectively altered, such as for DJ Dean, loving the sound of his base heavy voice, booming out, and Spencer 'testing' the mic.

From the opening scene, there was some inconsistency with volume or sound quality for the dialogue. A couple of the girls were periodically too quiet (ie between Roddy's introduction and 'I Believe in Miracles'), and during the scene before 'Last Dance', Lorraine had a peculiar echo.

Unless I'm mistaken, Eamon was playing an acoustic guitar, but the sound appeared to be that of an electric?

I appreciate it is difficult to get SFX 100% correct for a fast-moving musical when there's so little tech time, and the relatively minor issues certainly weren't significant enough to spoil the overall sound quality of the show.

**Bronwyn Hodgkins**, **Debbie Mann** and **Sara Richardson** must have had a few good laughs working on the wardrobe for Boogie Nights! I'm pleased any temptation to over use the more flamboyant fashions of the era, was resisted. Naturally, there were plenty of opportunities to have fun with costumes... especially the 'fancy dress' outfits... but rather like the previously mentioned home décor, fashions didn't change quite so quickly back then, and weren't so affordable for everyone. The mix of varying 70's fashion and some run of the mill standards of the time, worked well making the overall look of piece, more credible. It would have been helpful to have more costumes changes to separate the opening 'wedding' sequence, and the Saturday night at Boogie Nights, which Roddy refers to.

Roddy and Debs did manage a quick change out of the wedding outfits, but everyone else was in the same clothes.

It's a shame the budget ran out, leaving Courtney Fleming without a T-shirt at one point... but no one seemed to mind (especially the women), so I'm happy to overlook it this time!!

The all-inclusive choreography of **Natalie Hayllor** was cleverly worked out in terms of being able to keep the energy up by moving smaller groups around during longer sequences. Company routines were especially impressive because it appeared that **everyone**, regardless of ability, was in time and managed the moves effectively. There were plenty of examples of this, however it was especially noticeable during Reach Out and Happy Days. with some very impressive, well executed armography in the latter. Relatively simple, mass movement can be very effective when performed as well as this was, and interspersed with more technical routines from those more gifted in Terpsichore, there was a wonderful balance, so well done to Natalie.

The dancers dressed in the same costumes as Debs and Lorraine when singing Last Dance was a nice touch; however, I felt the balletic routine accompanying I Will Survive wasn't needed. It's no reflection on the performance of the dancers involved, but Amy Cowie easily has the talent to have taken total command of the stage on her own, however the audiences focus was divided.

I applaud **Nick Gordon, Tyler Spicer** and **Steve Gilbertons** who all worked hard, under the leadership of Musical Director, **Peter John Dodsworth**. It seems I am often lauding the talents of musicians who are not always fully appreciated by the audience. However, this is primarily because when the band gets it right, they tend to be taken very much for granted, and it's very easy to forget how hard they work. I take my hat off to Peter and co, for a job extremely well done.

If I have any comments to make about the band, it's that the opportunity was missed to bring them into the production more. I feel that they could have had costumes, rather than musicians' traditional black dress, and better 'stage' lighting when playing as 'The Love Machine'.

Vocally, there were undoubtedly some very talented singers to work with, some outstanding performances and great harmonizing (first rendition of "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" comes to mind). On a couple of occasions, I felt the vocal gymnastics weren't appropriate for the era?

I appreciate that the audience were already 'on side' but it takes some skill to portray a character as unpc as Roddy, yet still be charming and agreeably engaging, however **Stuart Hayllor** had no problem with it. Stuart expertly narrated the show with a perfect balance of storytelling and audience interaction, and smoothly transitioned from dialogue to song. The strutting, cool dude, persona was nicely accompanied by a certain amount of naivety at times, making the character of Roddy, all the more believable... and likeable. There appeared to be a difference in delivery of songs, when Stuart was singing as 'Roddy the storyteller', and when the performer, but intended or not...it worked.

During the 'Elvis/miscarriage' scene with Eamon, I felt a few well-placed pauses would have given the scene more gravitas, especially being an otherwise fast paced show, but in all it was a confident, humorous and expertly crafted performance from Stuart. Well done.

The story of Boogie Nights is a bit of a roller coaster ride for Debs, nicely played by **Amy Cowie**. From the joy of her wedding day through to the awkwardness of school dating and the sadness of her miscarriage, the audience were able to share the emotions of the moment, such is the subtle versatility of Amy's talent. Amy's singing ability is also wonderfully versatile and it was a wise move to save the full power of Amy's voice for when it made most impact. Much as there was nothing wrong with the vocals of I Will Survive, more of a 'performance' focusing only on Debs, may have had a stronger impact, however, a very accomplished performance.

Terry and Trish are the loyal, quirky friends everyone should have. **Kirsty McDougall**, as Trish, had a believable, sincere relationship with Debs and kept up a good pace of dialogue, giving a strong, overall performance. **Ashleigh Wells** has a natural comedic ability as nerdy, Terry... (who would need a sense of humour to wear his red and gold outfit!). There was a nice difference in the various aspects of

Terry's character, depending if he was being a 'mate' with Roddy, the boyfriend of Trish or in a general social situation. Both Kirsty and Ashleigh offered solid supporting characters.

The feeling I got is that Eamon was added by the writers as a bit of an afterthought, although this is no reflection on **Duncan Hamilton's** performance. A man's man who's never got over the loss of his wife, Eamon did appear to be a slightly lost soul, consoling himself with the music of Elvis. The role was emotionally well pitched by Duncan, with good vocal performances, a realistic gait for a man who enjoys a beer too many, and displayed some great 'dad dancing'.

**Rutendo Mushambi** certainly looked the part as a smooth front man for the resident band, and has a mellow timbre which works well in for songs such as I Believe in Miracles/You Sexy Thing. If Rutendo had projected more light and shade into his dialogue, Spencer would have come across as more assertive and charismatic, characteristics which I felt were missing.

I don't feel there was enough made of the character of Lorraine. **Emily Burton** lived up to expectations in terms of singing prowess and flirtatious behaviour, however 'Lorraine' seemed to make an entrance, sing or flirt, and exit. Perhaps this is as a result of the way the character is written into the script, (or even just my perception) but I feel more could have been made of her relationship with Spencer, in particular.

**Daniel Strong** has good stage presence and the relatively few times he was heard singing solo, were a delight. Dean is probably the most intelligent and sensitive character of the show which did come across in his overall demeanour, however Daniel has a habit of leaning forward when delivering dialogue, which comes across as the character lacking self confidence. If Daniel relaxes into his hips when speaking, he would appear more natural in his interaction.

It's a shame the programme doesn't have a complete photographic list of the cast, because there are several members of the ensemble who stood out for the right reasons, but I don't know who they were. Overall, the ensemble made efficient entrances and exits, made good use of the stage and formed natural looking groupings. There was great energy and enthusiasm during the dance routines and as previously mentioned, I especially enjoyed the standard of dancing from EVERYONE.

Under the Direction of **James Lole**, this EBOS production of Boogie Nights had great pace, flowed fairly effortlessly and the attention to detail made it truly evocative of the era. There were very accomplished performances from some principals, however the entire cast worked together well to make it a truly 'ensemble' piece.

There were a couple of points missed in the direction, such as Roddy's line 'See the blushing bride', but the bride was nowhere to be seen, (maybe a late entrance the evening I saw the show?), however the only significant point of production I would like to have seen is defining 'The Love Machine' more. Its not until reading the programme, I realised 'the Love Machine' singers were a specific trio who were supposed to be part of the band, and at the end, I feel Roddy should have looked like he was on stage fronting the band, fulfilling his dream, as opposed to moving downstage, on his own. The lines felt a little too blurred.

Boogie Nights was a well produced show with a great feel good factor and made for a thoroughly entertaining evening. especially for those of us of a certain age. Well done James and EBOS.

Terry Hunt.

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