



Society : East Berkshire Operatic Society
Production : Guys and Dolls
Date : 17th – 21st July 2018
Venue : Wilde Theatre
Report by : Susan Boobyer-Pickles

Show Report

This EBOS production was supported by South Hill Park and used to promote the arts generally and to raise funds – we certainly hope that in this respect it was a successful show. Coming straight of the back of the May production clearly a lot of planning had gone on by the production team to ensure such a limited and overlapping rehearsal period would prove successful.

While this show is still performed fairly regularly and enjoyed by audiences it does run the risk of falling onto the “a bit too dated list”, it is also suffers from being overly long especially in Act 1 – of course there’s not much any drama society can actually do about that – however the approach taken by EBOS to perform as a small ensemble really worked and ensured that the pace and energy was high throughout.

Natalie Haylor as Director and Choreographer clearly had a very strong idea of how this production was going to look and feel, and with a limited cast there was a lot of thought to the principle casting and the way the ensemble and the principles would fit into each scene. I think the overture really set the scene for the rest of the show with everyone adopting really strong characters from tourists, hawkers, blindman to name just a few. In fact, throughout the show, all the characters whether named or ensemble were well portrayed, and the audience was very clear about the part that person was playing even if 5 minutes before they were playing a completely different character. To me this was one of the most impressive aspects of this show. The choreography was well conceived and well performed by the whole cast and it appeared that all the movement was within the capability of all the cast. The Hot Box girls performed well especially in A Bushel and a Peck where they were sassy and a bit cheeky; in Oldest Established there was some great hat work from the gamblers. Other highlights were Sit Down Your Rocking the Boat and the whole Havana scene where the dancing started balletic and gentle and then really ramped up to the fight scene – you could really feel the tension rising so well done everyone.

The set design and the styling of the projection, programme and other media was of a high standard – and all accomplished by **Duncan Bruce**. The programme was clear and informative (I now know how to play Craps!) and the use of projection simple but creatively done. I really enjoyed the set with its revolving middle which allowed seamless scene changes – it was good to see the actors using the revolve to move from scene to scene as required – better than struggling or making any entry/exit too obvious and also being involved in the scene changes with the crew to ensure the show never lagged. The side parts for small scenes and storage of props worked well and again actors were able to set or clear items unobtrusively while remaining in character or changing into their next character, also use of the top platforms for mini scenes allowing scene changes below. The scene changes were swift and without any problem on the night I attended especially the major change to Cuba and the removal / push back of the central revolve to open up the scene - the star cloth added the correct amount of atmosphere. The addition and movement of the ground lights was a really nice touch to depict a “stage” for the Hot Box dancers and the “flight” to Cuba added interest and masked the scene change; it is this attention to detail that really elevates a production.

Everyone involved in creating the set, gathering the props and crewing on the night should be congratulated as on the night I attended everything worked seamlessly and nothing looked out of place.

At this venue we often see the musicians hidden away but this never seems to be a problem; for this production once again we were treated to a beautiful and melodic sound from the 6 piece band. **Tim Cumper** assembled a very talented group who managed the score beautifully with no major discord or timing issues with the actors on stage. I presume there were screens for the actors to see Tim conducting but this was never overly obvious. The sound for the show was designed by **Phil Hoegger and Tom Horrox** with Tom operating. All actors could be well heard both speaking and singing and as previously noted the balance between singing and music was well balanced. Lighting design by **Andrew Ellis** and operated by **Steve Davis** was not overly complicated with good use of down lights and coloured gels. A nice atmosphere was produced for the Havana scene and the street scenes were bright and cheerful. The subtle light changes in Sit Down YRTB were well conceived and added just enough interest to a busy scene. Of particular note was the underground scene where all technical partners needed to work closely together – dim and atmospheric lighting, echo on sound, tone of the score – all added to the enjoyment of watching these scenes.

Costumes are a key point in a show that relies on a time period and style and largely all the costumes were really superb. The Salvation Army costumes were exactly as you would expect them and the costumes used for the big dance scenes (Hot Box and Havana) were lovely and all fitted well. It was good to see that the Hot Box girls all had the same tights and shoes which really make a difference to the overall impression. The men also looked good although for me the suit (or it might have been the tie) worn by Nathan Detroit looked too modern and the wider brim to his hat rather shadowed his face and expression – I was in the balcony so maybe this was a factor. Well done **Sara Richardson** for conceiving a great array of costumes and for the bottomless pit that is the EBOS wardrobe that provided them. I would also like to say that I was impressed with the hair styling that went on during the show – some of the girls must have had a busy time redoing hair for their different characters – and that make up was really well applied and appropriate for era.

The Ladies Ensemble

These 5 ladies worked tirelessly throughout the show, revelling in their big dance numbers as the Hot Box or in the Havana scenes but also as every other character that they played – Salvation Army members, Gamblers, and their opening/closing scene alter egos. The dancing was very well executed, and it was clear how much fun you were having in the Hot Box numbers. It was wonderful to see each of you in every role you played – and the transformation undergone to achieve each role whether it be styling or acting. Well done **Kelly, Megan, Amy, Robyn and Erin**.

Jenny Brown (General Matilda B Cartwright). A small role but perfectly portrayed. You managed to convey strength of character while retaining a sense of compassion towards Sarah. Well spoken and commanded the stage.

The Male Ensemble and smaller roles

As with the ladies the men played their part(s) well whether it be a named role, a gambler or as part of the general opening/closing scenes. The highlights were the gambling scenes where the men performed very well each having their own character and look and the church scene. **Damian Thomas** (Rusty) gave a good performance in the Fugue number; **Richard Young** (Lt Brannigan) struggled a bit on occasion to be heard through the accent but well done, and all the men, for the pretty representative accents throughout. **Luke Robinson** (Harry the Horse) and **Keith Sullivan** (Big

July) commanded the stage when required and certainly looked the part. Luke in particular had a very good, and clear, accent.

Julian Hirst (Arvide Abernathy) – like the General this part is often not sought out by the more accomplished actor because it is quite small if the production is played with a full cast, however Julian really got under the skin of the character. A lovely, slightly dour Irishman full of humour and kindness. Julian had great comic timing and I very much enjoyed the “long steps” on exit in the first church scene. I don’t think I have seen “More I Cannot Wish You” performed as well – Julian really pulled at the heartstrings with an understanding of the situation which was heartfelt and kind.

All the men can be commended for their efforts on dance and movement throughout especially in the Havana scene, for the crap games, in particular “Luck be a Lady”, and the hat work.

Austin Marshall (Nathan Detroit) really came across as the feckless lover. A larger than life character that you can’t help but like even though he is trying to play everyone against each other; cheeky, enthusiastic, strong with a great accent. In particular I enjoyed “Sue Me” where we got the sense that Nathan was really ready to submit to his lot.

Sian Marshall (Miss Adelaide) a wonderful slightly dopey but chirpy character which worked very well with the humour and the naivety of Adelaide. Sian can act, sing and dance brilliantly and commits herself to a role wholeheartedly no less seen than in “Adelaide’s Lament”, not only singing in accent but also as if with full on sinusitis! Sian really understood the song and brought out all the comedy and sincerity the song demands. Take Back Your Mink was a highlight with some great acting and expressions.

Stuart Hayllor (Sky Masterson) was very confident on stage, handsome and outgoing in character. Stuart has a really nice tone to his voice which ensured all the dialogue was clearly heard. “I’ll Know” very melodious and well sung with a real sense of sincerity and “Luck be a Lady” another highlight – well sung and full of tension. Stuart has the ability to embrace a role and to compliment the leading lady and other players. He is able to make any situation seem totally natural and anyone on stage with him must feel safe and secure in the knowledge that he knows exactly what he is doing.

Kirsty McDougall (Sgt. Sarah Brown) was pretty and very bright which I liked and a refreshing change from the rather quiet/drab Sarah that is normally seen. Clearly committed to her task to bring the sinners in off the streets! Kirsty had a lovely rapport with the rest of the Salvation Army players especially with Arvide. Some of Sarah’s songs are very much in the high range and while Kirsty struggled a bit with the top notes the performance of the songs far outweighed any note issues.

Sky and Sarah had a great rapport which was sparky and funny. The kiss was nicely done and the “love moment” well managed. The act 1 finale trio of songs were very well done and the reversal of roles with a wonderful drunk Sarah being flirty and Sky desperately not wanting to take advantage of her – a lovely interpretation from them both.

Dario Biedma-Coleman (Benny Southstreet) along with Rusty and Nicely Nicely gave a great rendition in the Fugue for Tin Horns where fabulous harmonies were given by all three actors, tuneful and especially interesting as the lead vocal was never overpowered as the others held back in turn. Good diction and character throughout.

Dario and Brad worked well together throughout the show and played off each other to good effect this could be seen clearly in the "Guys and Dolls" number.

Brad Clapson (Nicely Nicely Johnson) – Brad is a joy to watch on stage and was totally committed to the character of Nicely Nicely. Brad is an excellent character actor, has a great singing voice and can really dance. From the very start and his song with Benny and Rusty through to the mega "Sit Down Your Rocking the Boat" we were treated to a wonderful high energy performance. Very well done.

I enjoyed the format of this show with a small cast that ensured everyone was busy and engaged throughout – I didn't mind if a main character suddenly popped up as part of the ensemble and the single cast bows at the end reinforced the importance of each cast member. The quality of the whole cast shone through; the production team, the cast and all involved should be rightly proud of the plaudits that I am sure you received.

Thanks for inviting Terry and I to Guys and Dolls we thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Susan Boobyer-Pickles

Joint NODA Representative – London Region District 14